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Mr. Bremble's Buttons

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A NOVEL

BY

Dorothy Langley

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1947

SIMON AND SCHUSTER, NEW YORK

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PUBLISHED BY SIMON AND SCHUSTER, INC.
ROCKEFELLER CENTER, 1230 SIXTH AVENUE,
NEW YORK 20, N. Y.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AMERICAN BOOK-STRATFORD PRESS, INC., NEW YORK

TO JOE, with gratitude and love

The characters and situations in this book are wholly fictional and imaginative: do not portray, and are not intended to portray, any actual persons, organizations or parties.

* 1 *

HENRY, those marigolds need attention," said Amelia. Henry Bremble looked at her over his glasses. If there was one flower he hated more than another—and he hated them all, though reluctantly admiring some of the things they did with themselves in the blossoming season—it was the tall orange marigold, *Calendula gigantica officinalis*, of which there was great plenty in his garden. "What's the matter with them now?" he asked.

Amelia looked patient. "I should think you could see for yourself. They need tying up. They're growing so fast, they're already flopping all over the place. It makes the whole garden look messy. I don't see how you can call yourself a gardener and never *notice*!"

"I don't call myself a gardener," Mr. Bremble protested, not for the first time. "You call me one."

He spoke resentfully, for Amelia had always been too quick for him and he had been helplessly gardening ever since the day when, early in their marriage, he had learned to his astonishment from her lips that he adored it. "Henry simply adores gardening," she had said, in his presence, to their next-door neighbor. "He's never so happy anywhere as he is right here among his buds and blossoms." She gave a

trill of purposeful, determined laughter, making her husband's head feel as though it had been severely patted.

The neighbor, a man of genial girth, comfortably established in a canvas deck chair with a book and a julep, looked at Mr. Bremble with a good deal of concentrated dislike. "That so?" he said.

Amelia nodded brightly. "It's such a lovely hobby, I always think."

The loathly word came from her without loathing, and Henry Bremble, squarely confronted for the first time with the truth about what his marriage had gotten him into, stood aghast. He had been a cheerful, quiet, unassuming young man with a secret passion for quoting the English poets and an eager, sensitive consideration for others that caused him to quote them almost exclusively to himself. Aside from this trait, surely a harmless one, there had been nothing remarkable about him. But at least he had been a man. Amelia's words had turned him into a fugitive, and he had been fleeing from her ever since.

He listened to her now as she went on about the marigolds, progressing, after she had sufficiently reproved him, to the cooing patronage with which she made it a point to speak of flowers, children, and other properties generally assumed to be rare and exquisite beyond the power of ordinary speech to describe. "Such a brave little flower, I always think," she said now, of *Calendula gigantica officinalis*, "and so grateful for every tiny thing one does for it. Shame on you, Henry, to neglect the poor little golden darlings the way you do!"

Mr. Bremble closed his eyes. The poor little golden darlings! In his mind's eye he saw the marigolds tower above him, as some of them almost would when they reached their

blossoming height, for he was not of imposing stature, leer-
ing at him with a hundred orange eyes. The poor little
golden darlings. . . .

He opened his eyes and took a good look at Amelia. It was unthinkable that she should coo. She was a large, solid woman and already, at thirty-seven, displayed an alarming resemblance to her mother, who also cooed when she thought it suitable. Mr. Bremble's mother-in-law reminded him inescapably of a parakeet—not a parakeet on the hoof, so to speak, but a parakeet deceased (not recently) and stuffed by an incompetent taxidermist, so that the glistening but-
tons she wore for eyes were always slightly askew.

With a habit bred of years he fled from the thought of her and began busily separating the word "parakeet" into smaller words, pleased, beneath his irritation at Amelia's continuing rhapsodies about marigolds, at the number he was able to find without the aid of a pencil. "Pear, pare, reap, rape, take, rake, part, tear, park," his mind listed them nimbly under his surface attention to his wife. "Prate, rate, peer, rapt, trap, tape, taper, peat, pate, pert, kept—"

There would be a great many more if he allowed himself to use words of three letters, but this was beneath his dignity and against the rules of the game. Four letters was the minimum, proper nouns were not permitted, and he made nice distinctions between the exotic and the naturalized when it came to words taken over directly from foreign lan-
guages. Such familiar forms as "adieu" and "gauche" were satisfactory, and he had recently, after some deliberation, admitted "ersatz," which he liked.

This peculiar pastime had succeeded a long preoccupa-
tion with crossword puzzles, unsatisfactory because nearly all the puzzles, as he found them in the daily papers and in

such magazines as Amelia considered suitable decorations for the Bremble living room, were too easy to afford him any feeling of accomplishment. Moreover, they repeated and repeated themselves, showing an irritating predilection for certain convenient words, such as "ai" (a three-toed sloth) and "aster" (a fall flower). "Ait" (a small river island) annoyed him still more deeply, for no matter how often he saw it in print it looked ridiculous to him, continuing to suggest, in spite of all reason and many repetitions, a misspelling of "ate" (took nourishment, consumed). The English crosswords, when he could get hold of them, were better, but he seldom saw them. The English, he could not help feeling, did a great many things better than anyone else. Mr. Bremble loved England. He had never been there, but it always warmed him to think of it.

His favorite channel of escape, however, was no longer either the crossword puzzle or the making of words out of words. He still employed both on occasion, when he could not get away from Amelia, but his real passion was a secret one for buttons. In their common bedroom, craftily hidden from Amelia at the bottom of a box of her own containing the accumulated gas and light receipts of fifteen years, he had a sizable collection of them, all sorts, shapes, and sizes, and with these, in what privacy he could snatch for himself, he played a hundred fascinating games. He was an accountant by profession and a modest experimenter in pure mathematics on the side, and the buttons, with their endless possibilities for arrangement and computation, excited him.

He restricted himself sternly to the mathematical, again and again fighting down an impulse to name his buttons. Two of them, solid, shiny green lumps uncompromisingly carven, one a little larger than the other, represented to him

Amelia and her mother, and it was not easy to refrain from so entitling them. Besides, there was another, a very handsome button of enamel and crystal, that he would have liked for namesake of his own, and to imagine it rolling about performing deeds of daring, such as rescuing a lady button who lived in an English cottage.

But he would not, for he knew from his reading that this would indicate a serious neurosis, if not an actual psychotic condition. "That way madness lies," Mr. Bremble told himself, and sighed.

As women's clubs meet mostly in the daytime, his opportunities to play with his buttons were rare. But once in a while Amelia went forth in the evening without him, to save the world by action of committee from whatever folly at the moment seemed to beset it. Amelia, like her mother, was a born committeewoman; she organized drives, headed crusades, telephoned endlessly. She called her altruistic fever "keeping abreast." If the English language contained one outworn phrase that did not form stock and staple of Amelia's daily conversation, Henry Bremble had yet to discover what it was. "A penny saved is a penny earned," she would remark with the gusto of genius, and look at her husband as though she expected applause. Mr. Bremble, who had long since come to the conclusion that adages are like reversible rugs, quite as useful on one side as on the other, said nothing, disappointing her.

But Amelia lived by adages. She was a woman of impenetrable prejudice. All decent people, according to Amelia—"decent people" was a favorite phrase of hers—thought thus and so and acted accordingly. If Mr. Bremble, matching adages with her once in a great while, ventured to suggest that circumstances alter cases, she shook her head.

"Not where decent people are concerned, they don't," she said positively. "The trouble with most people, Henry, is that they simply don't think; they never delve beneath the surface of things. That's exactly what's the matter with you. Your thinking is superficial." She looked at him severely. "You don't try to get below the surface," she concluded, driving her point home.

Mr. Bremble did not agree with her. It seemed to him that he spent his life below the surface, whatever the surface was. At any rate, he found himself frequently blinking at the light as Amelia, zealous for his good, hauled him up for an occasional look at it. Amelia's light did not appeal to him; it showed him a great many things he would rather not have seen. He was sorry that the world should be going to the dogs, as Amelia seemed to think, but he found it less distressing, even so, than the spectacle of Amelia and her colleagues crusading to save it.

He retired, accordingly, to buttons, crossword puzzles, the making of words out of words, and his mandatory gardening. If they had had a child, he sometimes thought wistfully, it might have been otherwise. But it was impossible to imagine Amelia with a child, in spite of her dulcet tones when she spoke of children. Indeed, in especially resentful moments he had permitted himself to doubt that her solid, well-cared-for body contained the necessary arrangements. If it did, and she knew it, it must have been a great embarrassment to her.

He tied up the aspiring marigolds as directed, and nodded meekly enough at her approval. "That's better," she conceded brightly, "isn't it, dear? Just look at them—they're actually smiling at you."

Mr. Bremble looked at the plants and quickly away.

"They'd better," he said grimly, not aloud. "The silly blighters," he added bitterly, giving full rein to the Anglophilia within him.

The marigolds had been attended to on Sunday, and on Monday morning, as usual, Mr. Bremble prepared to drive himself to the office of the large plumbing-supply corporation that was his place of business.

He backed the car out of the garage with his usual consciousness of taking his life in his hands. He did not like the car, had not wanted it, and was very much afraid to drive it.

It was a trim green convertible sedan whose suave appearance belied its malevolent nature. Amelia, who drove with the same firm confidence that characterized her approaches to the housing problem, juvenile delinquency, home-school relations, and the reorganization of Europe, had been impatient with his unwillingness to buy it. She had a small, smart coupé of her own, and it seemed to him unreasonable that he, a natural partaker of the hazards of public transportation, should be forced by whim of hers to take on the infinitely more horrible hazards of the independent motorist.

To Amelia, however, the two-car status of the Bremble household was no whim but a matter of grave import, bearing heavily on her self-respect and her respect for the prosperous suburban community in which she lived. "We can afford two cars now, Henry," she pointed out, "and you ought to be driving yourself to work every day, not rubbing shoulders with every Tom, Dick, and Harry on that miserable bus. We owe it to ourselves and to the community to live like decent people, don't we?"

Mr. Bremble, a little bewildered at what seemed to him a transition insufficiently led up to, considered this question

on its own merits and said that he supposed so. "I didn't know I wasn't," he added plaintively. "What am I doing now that isn't living like decent people, Amelia?"

She clucked with annoyance. "I'm talking about your buying yourself a car, Henry. You never listen to a word I say until I've said it at least a dozen times. Now will you please listen, this once, just for a minute? You need a car to drive yourself to work. Why don't you see about buying one?"

"See about buying one?" he repeated vaguely. "What for? I don't want a car. I don't even like them, Amelia. I—"

"It doesn't make any difference whether you like them or not," Amelia informed him. "You would like them if you knew anything about them. Men always like to drive."

The flat finality in her tone depressed him. He veered away from it by listing hastily, one after another, as many of Amelia's generalizations as he could manage before she spoke again: Men always like to drive. . . . Children owe something to their parents. . . . A gentleman can always be judged by the condition of his nails. . . . Women who ape men are deliberately wrecking society. . . .

Mr. Bremble pulled into the parking lot behind the plumbing house too late to escape the observation of Mr. Horace Widdinger, the head accountant and his immediate superior in office, who collaborated industriously with Amelia and her mother in making Mr. Bremble's life a hell.

Mr. Widdinger, as always, was jovial. He took his fat cigar from his mouth as he climbed out of his own sedan and banged the door behind him. "Well, well, well!" he shouted, in a voice that, Mr. Bremble was sure, could be heard all over the building and for at least three blocks in any direction outside it. "If it isn't Henrietta, right on time!"

Upstairs, Mr. Bremble knew, everybody within earshot

would be snickering with enjoyment. Mr. Widdinger, well known and universally acknowledged as a wit, was immensely popular. Whether he merely addressed Mr. Bremble as Henrietta, or whether he went further and became confidential about a perfectly sweet crochet pattern he had seen in a woman's magazine, he was sure of applause in advance. "It's just the thing, dearie," he would say confidentially, leaning over Mr. Bremble's twitching shoulder, "for that bare, ugly left-hand corner of your desk. You could whip it up in no time, and just think how it would soften the effect of these nasty old blotters and pencils, hey, Henrietta? Haw, haw, haw!"

And Susy Jennings, the pretty file clerk, and Willy Wilson, the red-haired office boy, and even old Prentiss himself, head of the corporation—if he happened to be within hearing—would laugh and look at Mr. Bremble; and if he did not laugh too, they looked at him sourly, as who should say, "Can't you take a joke? Haven't you any sense of humor?" And he felt within himself that each of them completed these questions, jeeringly, "*Henrietta?*"

Mr. Bremble had no gift of repartee. His English poets did not help him here. Sometimes, quivering with shame and anger but sitting silent and unresisting at his desk, he had recourse to what he remembered of Juvenal:

*Yet reach they first the goal, while by the throng
Elbowed and jostled, we scarce creep along,
Sharp strokes from poles, tubs,
rafters doomed to feel,
And plastered o'er with mud from head to heel,
While the rude soldier gores us as he goes
Or marks in blood his progress on our toes.*

But even this blistering passage, though on first reading it he had trembled between terror and a sort of vicarious and vengeful delight, seemed to lose all its force when put to the test.

Mr. Bremble, in fact, was helpless. He was helpless before cruelty of any kind, and before cruelty in the guise of humor he was thrice helpless. No matter how often he encountered it, it always surprised him. His mind seemed incapable of expecting it. There was a yellow light in Mr. Widdinger's eyes when jocosity took him, and in his own mind's eye Mr. Bremble saw the marigolds gloating from the garden. At his superior's explosive "Haw, haw, haw!" he saw the evil flowers break into a dance of hellish derision. He fled from the hateful sound far into himself, thinking wistfully and longingly of God.

For Mr. Bremble believed in God. He spent too many hours in God's company not to. It was the one real mitigation of his lot that almost every night, after he had gone to bed, God came and sat with him. They did not usually talk much, but nearly every time, though the only sound in the room was Amelia's gently whistling snore, Mr. Bremble went to sleep cradled in God's love like a child held close in its mother's arms.

Once in a long while, too, he ran across God in the daytime. One Sunday he had even found Him sitting in church. "Oh, yes," God explained, seeing his surprise, "I drop in every once in a while—sometimes just for a good laugh. I don't always get it, though. Sometimes I go away from here feeling pretty miserable, Henry. Pretty miserable." God sighed.

Mr. Bremble set a high value on his companionship with God, although he was very careful not to make practical

use of it. Once, to his speedy consternation, he had done so. Mr. Widdinger had been more than usually trying all day at the office, and Mr. Bremble in desperation had appealed to God. But he had not intended that Mr. Widdinger, who had a wife and three small children, should be stricken with typhoid fever; he was alarmed, and made haste to enter a protest, timid but agonized, against this too-emphatic form of co-operation. God heard him through without speaking. "You're a softy, Henry," He said at last. "Don't you know your Dickens? Discipline must be maintained."

But the next day Mr. Widdinger was better.

So nowadays, no matter how Amelia's proddings irked him or Mr. Widdinger's gaieties wore him down, Mr. Bremble kept it to himself and did the best he could. Now, as he hurried into the building with Mr. Widdinger's braying laughter trailing after him like a torn trouser leg catching at his ankle, he cast about wildly in his mind for a word to hide from himself his pain and his shame. "Mephistopheles," he muttered as he plunged for the revolving door. "Mist, pest, lest, heel, sole, mole, hole, shop, ship, poem, polite—"

* 2 *

MRS. CHRISTOPHER COREY, that quintessential mother-in-law—Mr. Bremble, who knew from his desultory researches that the mother-in-law legend antedated her by several centuries, was nevertheless unable to see how it could have done so—spent a good deal of time at the home of the Brembles. She had little else to do, for her patient husband had long since died of patience, and Amelia, married and settled, was her only child.

An additional attraction was the interest she and Amelia shared in club activities, although to Mr. Bremble it appeared that there was a substantial difference here between her and Amelia. Amelia's devotion to her clubs partook somehow of the love of a refugee for his refuge. She was passionate about the causes she supported and hysterical when they were criticized, although she had but a dim conception of their implications and would have been appalled at the idea of applying their basic principles to her own life.

Mrs. Corey, on the other hand, was passionate about nothing on earth but chocolate creams and her evil-tempered little dog, Queenie. Mr. Bremble, who had loved all dogs until he met Queenie, was inspired by Queenie with the only genuine hatred of any living creature that had ever,

in all his life, attacked him. He could not tell whether he hated Queenie because she reminded him of his mother-in-law or whether he hated her because her own personality, as expressed in her censorious, glassy-eyed stare, was the essence of all hatefulness in visible and perfected form. The latter supposition carried the greater probability, for Mr. Bremble did not actually hate his mother-in-law, any more than he actually hated Amelia. Indeed, as a spectacle Mrs. Corey often fascinated him, and the only real resemblance between her and Queenie was the fact that they were both a good deal given to sniffing.

Oddly enough, they sniffed nearly always in unison. Less oddly, perhaps, they sniffed most frequently after listening to the infrequent remarks of Mr. Bremble. Mr. Bremble, who talked as little as possible when they were present, was nevertheless impelled occasionally, sometimes by desperation, sometimes by mere civility, to say a few words on whatever subject occupied the group at the moment; and on each and every occasion, after he had done so, there was a silence during which the eyes of Queenie and Mrs. Corey dwelt upon his face, then sought each other with a dry surmise, then returned as if by clockwork to Mr. Bremble; and at the conclusion of another prolonged stare they sniffed.

Amelia, although she did not sniff, appeared to comprehend the sniffs of Mrs. Corey and Queenie. Mr. Bremble had noticed that every time they sniffed Amelia's face took on the same expression—an expression martyred yet patient, apologetic yet defiant. It was as though Mrs. Corey and the dog had said, "Look what you've married, Amelia," and as though Amelia replied resentfully, "Look what you've let me marry, and if you don't like it let's see you do something about it!"

Mr. Bremble had little doubt that when he was not present these mutual recriminations, veiled under varying thicknesses of conventional politeness, took a more articulate form than sniffing afforded. More than once he had come upon Amelia and her mother whispering together, and at his appearance they had sprung apart.

He could not persuade himself that their comments on his character, person, and proclivities were the invidious generalizations made by a certain type of woman concerning the male sex at large. Amelia, to be sure, was given to such comments, announcing with incredible bluntness and much repetition that all men were selfish, egotistical, self-centered, tyrannical, ignorant, prejudiced, and insensitive. But she felt no need of secrecy, or even of reticence, in disclosing these opinions. She even seemed to expect Mr. Bremble to agree with them. He knew, therefore, that when she and her mother put their heads together it was not men in general, but Henry Bremble in particular, with whom they were occupied.

Earlier in his marriage the knowledge had depressed him, for he was a conscientious man and would not willingly have hurt or failed Amelia. As time went on, however, this feeling was dulled. He had no way of knowing what they said of him, and therefore could do nothing to correct either their possible misapprehensions or his possible derelictions. Queenie was nearly always present on these occasions, and Mr. Bremble had more than once felt an impulse to take Queenie aside, much as he disliked her, and ask her what they said; but he had quelled the impulse each time, for fear she would tell him.

Nowadays, accordingly, when he had the ill luck to surprise Amelia and her mother in a confidential exchange, he

made some excuse and withdrew as soon as possible, leaving them to it. He found it much too painful to remain, for Mrs. Corey, with what she innocently believed to be great shrewdness and diplomacy, was accustomed, if he did remain, to begin talking to Amelia with hurried emphasis of the late Mr. Corey, referring to him throughout as "your daddy."

This term from her oddly avian mouth impressed Mr. Bremble as more macabre than quaint. Although he had known, and still clearly remembered, the late Mr. Corey as a quiet, self-effacing gentleman who had risen even to surprise on only one occasion in his memory—the occasion had been Mr. Bremble's engagement to Amelia, and the surprise had been that anyone should want to marry her—he could not, hearing Mrs. Corey say "your daddy," escape from a gruesome vision. He saw his late inoffensive friend and father-in-law as an aged and wambling daddy-long-legs driven helplessly from one side of a room to the other between Amelia and her mother, with Queenie snarling contemptuously from the side lines. Time and perspective had given Mr. Bremble a sorely convincing impression that the vision was a true one, and his tender conscience was thereby greatly disturbed. He wished that he had done more for Mr. Corey in his lifetime.

Meditating on these matters as he drove home from the office after a day with Mr. Widdinger, Mr. Bremble was suddenly shocked to realize that he had forgotten an important commission of Amelia's. She had asked him to buy score cards for a bridge party, the last session of a tournament currently being held by the League for Democracy, of which she was president, to raise funds for one of her many enterprises.

He had protested uneasily that he knew but little of these and kindred matters and would be sure to get the wrong kind of card, but Amelia had been impatient with his reluctance. "My goodness, Henry, it's a small enough thing to ask of you, I should think, and you right downtown all day. All you have to do is stop in at a stationery store during your lunch hour or after work, and buy them. I'll need—let's see—there'll be eight tables, that's thirty-two; just get three dozen, that'll make it safe if there should be an extra one. And try to pick out nice ones, even if they do cost a little more. Something suggestive of democracy. Mrs. Cable had such pretty ones when the ladies met with her; children dancing around a Maypole, really charming."

Mr. Bremble admitted that this was a charming idea. "How many of them were Negro children?" he inquired curiously after a moment.

Amelia stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You said something suggestive of—"

Amelia compressed her lips. "Really, Henry, there are times when it seems to me you're not quite bright. If you're just trying to be funny—"

"I'm not," Mr. Bremble protested. "I'm not a witty man, Amelia. Nobody knows that better than I do. I just meant—"

Amelia quivered. "Oh, you needn't think I don't understand you, Henry. This is just some more of your sneering at the good I'm trying to do, the work that means so much to me. Negro children, indeed!"

Mr. Bremble, seeing her close to tears, at once retreated. Courage, he knew too well, was no more his strong point than wit was, and he hastened with all willingness to appease her. "Well, how would it be if I got some patriotic design,

the flag or a bar or two of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’? Would that be all right, Amelia?”

Amelia hesitated. “Well, it’s not very original, of course, but I suppose it will do if you can’t find anything better. If I had time I’d go down and get them myself, but I haven’t, so for pity’s sake do try to use a little ingenuity, Henry. These things are important, and naturally I want my party to be as nice as any of the others, especially as it’s the last one in the tournament. The last time the League met with me Mrs. Carruthers made some remark about my decorations. Mother overheard her, fortunately, and told me about it, so I was warned in time, but even so I nearly lost the presidency when the officers came up for re-election.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Bremble in simple wonder.

Amelia sighed. “Don’t be so dense, Henry! Because Mrs. Carruthers has a following, that’s why, and she’s had her eye on the presidency ever since we organized. If I hadn’t found out what was going on and had time to do something about it—”

She was becoming excited again, and Mr. Bremble again essayed to soothe her. “Well, but you raised the money just the same, didn’t you, Amelia? The money you were having the party for?”

Amelia expelled an exasperated breath. “Of course we raised the money. What has that got to do with it?” As Mr. Bremble did not reply, she plunged on, quivering, “I suppose it’s no use on earth to expect you to understand me, Henry. I gave up all hope of that a long time ago. All I ask of you—and surely it’s little enough—is to get me those cards, if you can, and try to make a decent selection. Something suggestive of democracy, as I said, and three dozen, and above all a nice quality of paper, and silk tassels if possible.

And be careful about getting too much red in them. It doesn't go with the living room."

Remembering the passion with which Amelia had given him these instructions, Mr. Bremble, at the wheel of the convertible, was more than a little disturbed that Mr. Widdinger's attentions had taken his mind off what his wife considered so important. True, the party was still several weeks away, and he would have plenty of time to buy the cards, but that, Amelia would say, was not the point. The point was that he didn't care enough about her, had not consideration enough for her wishes, to do this small errand for her when she asked him. He thought momentarily of going back downtown, but a moment's reflection made it plain that the stationery shops would be closed for the day before he could reach them. Besides, he would be late for dinner, a sin almost beyond forgiveness so far as Amelia was concerned.

Mr. Bremble sighed and went on his way toward home. Amelia received the news of his failure in sulphurous silence, but Mrs. Corey, who, with Queenie ensconced on her ample lap, was refreshing herself with a quarter of a pound of chocolates in anticipation of dinner, felt called upon to comment. "Your daddy," she said to Amelia after the silence had had sufficient time to make itself felt, "was always so dependable. Nothing was too much trouble, he always said, if it pleased the little woman." Her bulging bosom, on which reposed a small piece of nut-crusted chocolate, heaved in sentimental memory. "He always called me that, 'the little woman.' "

Mr. Bremble doubted it. The phrase, he felt, would have come strangely from Mr. Corey's lips. Moreover, as he contemplated his mother-in-law's stiffly corseted figure, so

oddly like Amelia's in spite of the difference in their years, he found himself doubtful that Mr. Corey or anybody else would have described her casually—without first taking reasonable thought—as a woman at all, much less a little one. In spite of all his marital experiences, Mr. Bremble's romantic mind persisted in his boyhood conception of woman as a bright and different being, willowy yet heroic, flowerlike, mysterious, and indomitable. A woman's hand, he felt sure, would be stretched out in friendliness or fun, and there would be laughter sometimes in her eyes. Lines he had loved at sight, and never forgotten, came back to him:

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes. . . .*

Amelia had made no response to Mrs. Corey's reminiscence. Stony-eyed, she announced that dinner was ready. Mr. Bremble ate what little he could in the face of their united displeasure, and then escaped to the garden, muttering something about weeding the nasturtium bed before it was dark.

But when he had weeded the nasturtium bed and returned, hopefully, to the house, he found them whispering together and made haste to remove himself. "I think I'll take a little walk," he said.

His walk led him, as usual, past the old Paterson place four or five blocks down his own street. The house had always attracted him, in spite of its neglected and rather dilapidated appearance. In the first place, it looked like a house that had grown there of itself, springing up as casually

and carelessly as the daffodils and irises that fringed its ragged garden. For the garden itself Mr. Bremble had a deep-laid affection; it was so different from the one he tended for Amelia. Amelia, he knew, would have clicked her tongue at this garden. There was not a marigold in it from one end to the other.

Nevertheless, its wilderness ease made it charming to Mr. Bremble. He liked its grass-grown walks, its uneven borders; he admired the nonchalant persistence of its blossoms, which cheerfully elbowed their way up, year after year, through tangling weeds, to flower at last as exuberantly as if no weeds existed; and he liked the old-fashioned summerhouse, covered with grapevines and wistaria, that stood inartistically in the middle of it, the unstable benches still creaking with every breeze of a timeless, gracious, unapologetic hospitality. They were benches on which a magazine could be left lying open, and there was a rustic table, long denuded of paint and none too steady on its legs, that would yet support a tray of glasses and a comfortable pipe. Mr. Bremble, who did not smoke, felt that if he had lived in the Paterson house he would have done so.

The house, a rambling two-storied affair that managed by its peculiar magic still to look like a cottage, had been unoccupied for several years. Mr. Bremble had never been inside it, and yet, he felt, if he should go inside it there would be nothing unfamiliar about it. There was a paradox in his picture of the interior; he did not think of it as unfurnished, and yet he felt that nothing could be bought in a store that the house would not immediately reject. Nothing, that is, but books.

There would be books in abundance and books of all kinds—no picayune choosing here, no paltry fears; no shrink-

ing of the mind from critical diatribes, no unworthy feeling of inferiority or shame. Horatio Alger, no doubt, would stand cheek by jowl with Plato.

And some of the flowers would have moved inside into bowls. "Why not," he could imagine them asking, "why not have a change? Let's make the whole place beautiful inside and out, for today is the thing, after all, and if we don't live so long inside as we would on our stems, what matter? Spring will be coming around again in no time, and we'll be back, or, if we're not, the others." For a flower, Mr. Bremble thought, has little in common with man, who makes his short life bumpy with dissension and hideous with care, who sets preposterous value on the little and turns away with a shudder from the great.

Aside from the books and the flowers there would be a staircase, wide and winding, up to the rooms of repose and down again to the rooms of comfort and laughter. And there would be a fireplace—of this there was more substantial evidence than dreams, for its rugged gray stone chimney meandered up one side of the house, in plain view of all—and the fireplace would have a wide comfortable hearth, where a dog and children might lie and look into the fire.

Mr. Bremble's mind, as always, faltered at the thought of children. Deeply as he loved the idea of a child, he was afraid of children themselves. They seemed to him so altered from the pattern.

And what wonder if they were? Mr. Bremble thought of Amelia, who, he knew, if she had had children, would have been what is commonly spoken of as an ideal mother. True, he had found it always impossible to connect her with the idea of pregnancy and the generative process, for he knew her too well not to realize what an offense these would be

to her; but once the child was in the world, with what persistence, what assiduity, would Amelia have bent herself to the task of making it over!

She would not have been so crass about it, probably, as some mothers. She would not have yanked and slapped her child, as he had seen a woman do on the street last Christmas, merely because the child could not restrain her joy over the sparkling displays in the Yuletide windows.

Mr. Bremble shuddered at the memory. The child had cried out repeatedly, "Oh, look, Mamma—oh, look!" only to be silenced each time with a snarling "Shut up!" And she had tried, tried hard indeed, to obey. After each angry order she had shrunk, and grown smaller in her shabby clothes, and let her soft face fall with a terrible meekness, and lost the joy and wonder from her eyes. But after a little time some new miracle would burst upon her, and she would forget and cry again, "Mamma, look!" Whereupon, and finally, the woman seized her and slapped her several times. "I told you to shut up, didn't I?" she gritted as she slapped. "Now I guess you know I meant what I said. Nobody's interested in what you have to say, do you hear me?"

Mr. Bremble, remembering, clenched his fists, for the woman had not been satisfied even then; she must needs look about her at her fellow-pedestrians, seeking admiration; she smirked. There surged over Mr. Bremble now, as there had surged at the time, a furious desire to stride forward and shake the woman till her teeth rattled, to slap her as she had slapped the child, to shout into her distorted face that, for all she knew, the whole world might some day have been interested in what that child had to say, if it hadn't been for her stupidity, her fathomless, fatheaded, unforgivable stupidity and cruelty. He had not done anything

of the kind, of course, but it shamed him that he had not. He could hardly bear, even now, to think of it.

No, Amelia would not have done the like of that. But would she not, armed in one hand with her sacred maternity and in the other with the cut-and-dried regulations set forth by the still more sacred organizations before whose altars she did daily worship, have torn down and battered out, just as effectively, every natural impulse the child knew? It was the organizations that appalled him, and in his mind he framed a bitter pun. His child would not have been slapped, she would have been beaten to death with clubs.

On the whole, Mr. Bremble had no desire to be a parent.

But he liked to think of children in the Paterson house. There, since nobody of Amelia's way of thinking would accept the house as a gift, they might grow like the flowers, in innocent beauty. There would be no quarreling, no venom, for them to seize upon and imitate as their only defense against a hostile world. There they would keep their delicious, untainted laughter—how soon, how tragically soon, thought Mr. Bremble, the laughter of children is changed to the cackling of demons!—and the daily wonder of discovery and adventure. And, if they grew up so, would they not come forth mighty? Would they not be poets and seers, statesmen of that better world toward which, having no true conception of it, Amelia and her friends believed themselves to be striving?

He amused himself, as he walked toward the house, with his dream of the house's family. It would be no ordinary family, that one. He built it up in his mind somewhat on the lines of a picture he remembered from childhood, a picture of children with differing faces, yet surely brothers

and sisters, clustered about the knees of someone who looked down upon them with amusement and blessing. And the eyes of the guardian did not falter in meeting the eyes of the black child or the yellow one, and the lips held the same understanding smile for all.

Mr. Bremble knew quite well that the picture he had in mind was the familiar painting entitled "Christ Blessing Little Children." But some whimsical perversity of his own made him prefer to set a woman in the Saviour's place. She would be kind, that woman, and very merry, and she would be mother to the children's spirits no less than to their bodies. And somehow, by some mystical connection that partook not at all of ordinary marriage and parenthood, they would be her children, white and colored. Hers and Henry Bremble's.

He had reached the house now and was about to halt, as was his custom, and lean upon the gatepost of the battered picket fence, and look and rest and dream his favorite dream, when suddenly his eye caught a blur of white in the summerhouse, and he stopped and stepped involuntarily backward a pace or two, wondering.

There was a woman sitting in the summerhouse.

She was alone and had apparently been reading, for an open book lay face down on her knee. But it was too dark to read now, and she sat there relaxed, a slender, restful figure in summer white, although it was only the middle of May. She had put flowers in a glass on the rickety table. Mr. Bremble could see them, pale and petaled in the dusk. He could not make out her face beyond a blur of dark hair and a pair of shadowy, reflective eyes.

Having recovered from his first surprise, he became aware that smoke was rising from the fireplace chimney and that a

rich low voice, unmistakably Negro, was caroling in the kitchen to the subdued accompaniment of clattering china. The words of the song were melancholy, but the voice that sang them was opulent and throaty with joy.

*"Look down, look down that lonesome road
Before you travel on,"*

sang the voice exultantly.

"Look up, look up, and face yo' Maker—"

The woman in the summerhouse stirred and sighed. Then she sank back into her chair and closed her eyes.

*"Weary totin' sech a load,
Travelin' down that lonesome road—"*

sang the voice now, and was abruptly still. Its cessation had the effect of breaking a spell, and Mr. Bremble, startled at the silence, looked again to see whether he had not imagined the song, and the smoke from the chimney, and the flowers on the table, and the woman on the summerhouse bench; but only the song had vanished, the rest remained. A moment later the kitchen door slapped to, and he saw the Negro girl come out with dishtowels and hang them on a line.

Mr. Bremble turned himself about and started home, not knowing whether he was more interested or more disturbed that someone had come to live in the Paterson house.

* 3 *

THERE was a terrible and piteous story in the paper next evening. Mr. Bremble, picking up the journal as he entered the house, absent-mindedly carried it upstairs with him. A picture caught his eye, and for a moment he stood staring, unable to take it in. An Italian child had been beaten by his parents almost into insensibility, locked into a foul closet and deserted. Discovered after two days, he had been dragged forth and had his picture taken, crying, for the newspapers. There were bare patches on his broken scalp, where clumps of hair had been torn out by his father's hands.

Mr. Bremble cast the paper aside, feeling sick. It was not the only story of the kind he had seen lately, but it was the only one that had a picture, or at least such a picture. Mr. Bremble felt a rasping in his throat. "Why does He allow it?" his mind involuntarily pleaded, and then he caught his breath in great dismay, for he saw that God was with him.

God, however, did not seem offended. "I know how you feel, Henry," He said mildly enough. "You don't think I like this sort of thing, do you?" He paced the floor, frowning, for a moment. "It all happened a long, long time ago, you

see, when I first had the idea of creating mankind. I had Satan helping Me then—Lucifer his name was, before I had to throw him out. Giving free will to man was his idea, not Mine. He was a first-rate poet, damn his leathery hide, and he got Me all worked up. Gave Me a long harangue about the stupefying beauty of man's mind, the infinite possibilities of his spirit. Said if I'd agree to give My human creatures free will they'd grow to the stature of gods themselves some day, so that they could rule My world in justice and kindness and truth, forever and ever amen, and all I'd have to do would be to sit back and see that it was good. Well, anybody likes to look forward to retiring some day."

God paused. "Of course, I know now that it was just some more of his finagling. He knew that if I gave the idiots free will he'd be able to make plenty of use of it. But he sold Me on it; he sold Me. A bargain's a bargain." God shook His head despondently. "And what's come of it? War, hatred, cruelty, the torturing of women and children. And for what reasons, I ask you! Look at what they call the racial problem. Of all the crack-brained, dim-witted, prechaotic, incomprehensible accumulations of nonsense the so-called mind of man has ever conceived . . . Why, all I was after when I made several different kinds of men was a little amusing variety; any half-baked artist could understand that. And they were good too, every one of 'em, if I do say it Myself. Each of them had his own gifts that none of the others had. I thought they could more or less swap 'round, you know, and learn from each other. Satan—blister him!—thought it was the best idea I ever had. He certainly sold Me down the river that time."

"But—" Mr. Bremble hesitated. "But can't You—"

God looked at Mr. Bremble keenly and kindly. "Carry

it through in spite of him, you mean? Make your mind easy, I'm going to. Here's a funny thing, Henry; I want you to remember it. A whole crop of evil may spring from a seed of good if you don't know how to plant the seed and tend it. Satan was a poet, and like all poets he had hold of something a lot bigger than he realized. Do you think he could have convinced Me—Me—if I hadn't recognized the truth in what he said? The mind of man *is* potentially divine; why shouldn't it be? I made it. The spirit of man *has* infinite possibilities; I created it from My own. Maybe if I'd held off a few thousand centuries on the free will business, until mankind had got a little farther along—and then, on the other hand, maybe without free will you wouldn't have got as far as you have. What do you think?"

Mr. Bremble said he didn't know.

"Neither do I, just yet," admitted God. "But one thing I do know, and that is that no thorn-tailed, humphheaded poet is going to get the better of Me—not in the long run. What wears Me down is his saying that in a couple of thousand years I'd be ready to retire. Couple of thousand years! A couple of hundred million would be more like it."

There was a silence. God picked up the newspaper and laid His hand on the child's picture. It seemed to Henry Bremble that while the hand rested there the child's face cleared into innocence and fearless beauty, and that he looked out smiling. But a moment later God removed His hand, and the picture was as before.

God laid the newspaper down on a chair. "As for that, Henry, and other stories like it," He said gently and sadly, "you'll just have to make up your mind to suffer. If you didn't suffer at such a sight as that, you would be no part of Me, and the blackness of darkness would be your portion

forever. Suffer then, and help wherever you can. It is all I ask of you."

He was turning to go, but Mr. Bremble, breathless, detained Him. "It will be all right some day, for this child and —and others?" he pleaded. "In another life, perhaps—"

But this was a question God would never answer. He paused at the threshold, looking a little stern. There was a faint mutter of thunder, though the sky outside was bright, and Henry Bremble lowered his eyes.

He could not look up again, knowing that he had presumed too far, but for a moment there was a majesty in the room that did not need to be seen to be acknowledged. The very furniture seemed aware of it. There was no wind, but the white curtain trembled at his side. Henry Bremble, his head bowed, awaited judgment.

No bolt was loosed upon him, and after a time he knew the room to be empty of any presence but his own. God's disappearance had left, as always, a flatness. Mr. Bremble got up mechanically and went downstairs to his dinner, remembering as he reached the lower hall that he had once more neglected to buy Amelia's score cards.

Amelia herself, emerging from the kitchen to summon him to dinner, took one look at his guilty face and sighed. "Well?" she said in a tone of resignation. "I suppose you forgot those tally cards again?"

Mr. Bremble, self-consciously fingering the newspaper he had carried downstairs, confessed it. Amelia made an exasperated sound. "Honestly, Henry," she burst out, "I don't know what's the matter with you. I don't believe there's another woman in the world—" But at this point her eye caught the newspaper with the picture, and she took it from him to look at it. "Tchk, tchk, tchk!" she exclaimed. "Did

you see this, Henry?" She compressed her lips and drew her brows together, but it seemed to Mr. Bremble that somehow, and for some quite inexplicable reason, she was not altogether ill-pleased. "If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times—we made a fatal mistake when we let down the bars of immigration in this country. That class of people will stop at nothing—nothing!"

She put the paper aside and returned to the agenda. "It does seem to me, Henry, that you might make a little effort now and then, especially for a thing like this tournament. It's very discouraging for me, working as I do to better conditions a little here and there, to have you act as if it all meant less than nothing. Haven't you any feeling for humanity at all?"

Haven't you any feeling for humanity at all?

Mr. Bremble, who was of a meditative turn of mind, pondered awhile on this (to Amelia) strictly rhetorical question. It was not that Amelia really considered him heartless. She had intended, as usual, only to point out the difference between them. And this difference, so far as Mr. Bremble could determine it, consisted chiefly of the fact that Amelia thought of humanity in the mass and he discovered it only in the individual. Mr. Bremble regretfully admitted to himself that humanity in the mass reminded him of nothing so much as the slugs in Amelia's garden.

God too, he presumed to think, must find His humanity in the individual, for in the mass, seen from God's point of vantage, it must be even more sluglike than Henry Bremble found it. God, having hope for the eventual victory of man over man's limitations, must have seen much more than the blobs of living gelatine swarming over the harsh earth.

He must again and again have taken a slug in His hand, looked at it, breathed upon it, listened with His miraculous senses for the stir of the soul's life within it. And to Satan, who must have done the same, He could look across this larva of the future with a calm and certain challenge in His eyes.

But Satan would not yield without a battle. They stood, the two gigantic figures, in Mr. Bremble's imagination, challenger and challenged, by no means lacking in respect the one for the other. And with good reason, both. Some lines of Byron came back to Mr. Bremble with force:

*And yet between His Darkness and His Brightness
There passed a mutual glance of great politeness.*

Byron had meant Lucifer and the archangel, not Lucifer and God, but the idea was the same. How wonderful, thought Mr. Bremble wistfully, is that gift which makes a man a poet! How even Satan had gained in saturnine splendor when God so denominated him!

Mr. Bremble, shifting his metaphor, went back painstakingly to the subject of humanity as it appeared to Amelia and her companions: Humanity, a lump. A malleable lump laid ready for the kneading; a lump to be pounded with norms and standards, stretched with admonitions, patted down with soothing adages and a modicum of physical comfort, and massaged with education. But pound and stretch and twist and massage as they might, they would not get far without leaven—that leaven which, Mr. Bremble's own experience told him, is developed only in silence, solitude and singleness of being.

Surely, too, there was an eccentricity, if not an actual insolence, in the fact that Amelia and her colleagues, thinking

of humanity as a lump, yet dissociated themselves from the lump and became its kneaders. By what authority did they bake God's bread? Not by His own, most certainly, or the finished product would have been more palatable.

What amazed Mr. Bremble was the almost universal acceptance of Amelia, her crusading friends, and the standards by which they lived and wrought. If here and there a voice was raised in question, with what horrified assiduity was it silenced!

Well, let it go. Perhaps humanity was not insulted by it after all. Perhaps humanity enjoyed it. Bread that is being kneaded cannot rise, of course; but, on the other hand, nobody expects it to. There might be advantages in that, thought Mr. Bremble, who himself was so yeasty within as to find it frequently inconvenient and even painful.

And it was lonely. Oh, yes, it was certainly lonely.

* 4 *

HE forgot the score cards again next day but was not taken to task for it, because he found, when he got home, that Amelia had a dinner guest.

They were discussing with some warmth, when he came down to the table after freshening himself, the unwisdom of allowing foreigners to enter the United States and make themselves at home. The guest, Miss Nellie Preston, known long but vaguely to Mr. Bremble as Amelia's most intimate friend, agreed in carefully tempered terms—all Miss Preston's terms were carefully tempered—that it had been unwise to let down the bars.

"That's just what I was saying to Henry, no longer ago than last night," Amelia replied with satisfaction. "Wasn't it, Henry? Those were my very words. We should never have let down the bars. Nobody believes in democracy more strongly than I do—my goodness, I give three-fourths of my time to democratic causes—but I always have said, and I always will say, that the line has to be drawn somewhere, doesn't it?"

"America for Americans," said Miss Preston judicially.

"That's it. That's it exactly. Just what I've always said.

I suppose you run into a lot of that other element in your work, don't you, Nellie?"

Mr. Bremble realized, with a slight shock, that Miss Preston was the only one of all Amelia's acquaintances whom Amelia ever addressed by her Christian name. The women who came to the house on errands connected with democracy and child welfare, or to play bridge for the raising of charitable funds, might as well have had no Christian names for all he knew or Amelia seemed to know. Mrs. Cable, Mrs. Carruthers, Mrs. Ford, Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Hyslop, Mrs. Courtland, Mrs. Prince. It was as though, by becoming a clubwoman, each of them had shed baptismal grace and put on instead the armor of organizational righteousness, snapping the title "Mrs." down over her eyes like a visor.

"Well, yes, I do," Miss Preston admitted now, carefully, in answer to Amelia's question. "In a public school, you know, one meets with all kinds. You have to take them as they come." She lifted her spoon to her wide, traplike mouth, took in soup, and removed it again. "This is delicious, Amelia," she said appreciatively. "Yes, I suppose at least forty per cent of my students this year are of foreign extraction. Second generation, you know."

"Imagine!" Amelia laid her own spoon on her plate. "Don't you find it fearfully trying, Nellie?"

Miss Preston shrugged. "Well, as I say, you have to take them as they come. They're all over the place now, you know, and I suppose they have to go to school! It's the parents, really, who are the most trying. They seem to think the teachers are responsible for everything their children do or don't do, out of school as well as in. They're always coming to school and complaining about things we have-

nothing to do with. One of them came in today, just as I was leaving—a Mrs. Perlberg—”

“Jewish,” interrupted Amelia explanatorily.

Miss Preston nodded. “Her boy has been cutting school lately, and she says it’s because his father has old-country ideas and doesn’t understand him and he’s miserable—confused, I think was the way she put it. . . . Well, I was tired, after struggling with the lot of them all day, and I’m afraid I didn’t mince my words with her. ‘Mrs. Perlberg,’ I said to her, ‘I don’t see what on earth you think I can do about Harold’s cutting his classes. I am a teacher of English literature, not a truant officer,’ I said, ‘and it’s been my experience, I may as well tell you, that when a student once begins cutting there’s very little that can be done about it. You might as well try to stop an apple from rotting after it once gets started,’ I told her.”

Amelia nodded approbation of this simile, and Miss Preston continued. “‘Mrs. Perlberg,’ I told her, ‘my working day ends at three o’clock. What my students do after that time is none of my business. Whether Harold and his father understand each other or not is no concern of mine. You seem to be a woman of some education, Mrs. Perlberg,’ I said, ‘and it seems to me you ought to be able to manage your own family affairs, at least.’ Well, then she began to cry, of course, and started telling me all the usual things about Harold not being a bad boy and so on, and how one time she found him in the public library when he was supposed to be in school, and he was reading Shakespeare—”

Mr. Bremble started slightly. “Reading Shakespeare?”

Miss Preston looked at him briefly. “That’s what she said. Of course, one can use one’s own good judgment when it

comes to believing it." She turned back to Amelia. "Well, I really had to laugh at that, Amelia. 'Mrs. Perlberg,' I said, 'I just wish you could have been here a few times during class, and watched me try to pound Shakespeare into Harold's head—maybe you'd have a better idea of Harold's interest in Shakespeare! Harold and Shakespeare,' I said, 'may have something in common, Mrs. Perlberg, but I assure you that from the beginning of this term to the present moment I've seen no evidence of it!' I really had to laugh."

"Well, I should think so," Amelia agreed, laughing too. "The idea! Poor Nellie, I should think you'd just about die."

"You have to take them as they come," Miss Preston said, finishing her soup. "I do sometimes, though. And they're not always so easily disposed of. You have to be pretty careful, for instance, with the Irish element."

"Catholics," explained Amelia, with an understanding nod.

"Well, yes, and politicians. 'And how!'-as my students would say," Miss Preston smiled, apologizing as she thus unbent. "It's as much as your job is worth to offend one of them, and do they know it—and do they take advantage of it! My 2A class average dropped this month from sixty to—let me see—thirty-seven, I think it was. Imagine!"

"Class average?" asked Mr. Bremble, puzzled.

Miss Preston favored him with another fleeting glance. "We grade on the curve," she told him, and turned back to Amelia. "I'm thankful, anyway, that I'll be getting out of the treadmill for a few days, anyway, before long. State teachers' meeting, you know. A little change always does one good, and sometimes the addresses are really very inspiring. They have prominent guest speakers, educators, you know, from

various parts of the country, and one has an opportunity to hear about their methods. Methods change all the time, you know, in education."

Amelia gave respectful assent. "I suppose they do. I was reading—"

"The last time I went to State," Miss Preston continued, "I came away really—well, really inspired, if you don't mind my repeating myself." She laughed. "Dr. Elihu Summers, I think his name was, from somewhere in Connecticut, was really wonderful. I remember so well what he said about the necessity of keeping our educational methods abreast of progress in other fields. 'This is a scientific age,' he said, 'and education, the queen of all sciences, must not be kept any longer from her throne. When we look back,' he said, 'say to the age of Plato, and contemplate the progress we have made in such things as the measuring and tabulating of intelligence from infancy through college, the setting up of normal standards of achievement, the breaking down of arbitrary courses of study, the introduction of the play element into learning, we have every reason to congratulate ourselves; but all this is nothing,' he said, 'before the glories to come.' He said he looked forward to a time when the education of a child, from kindergarten through the university, would be as much a matter of exact scientific formula as the building of an airplane motor." She laughed deprecatingly. "Dr. Summers is always so modern in his comparisons—they all are, in fact, right up to the minute. But isn't it a thrilling idea?"

"Yes," said Amelia, "it is, Nellie, it really is."

Miss Preston nodded. "It's things like that that compensate me when I'm tired or discouraged—and I do get both tired and discouraged sometimes, Amelia, I assure you!—for

having turned my back on a woman's normal life of marriage and motherhood and given myself to—well, to the life of the mind. I think I might even say—" Miss Preston deliberated—"I think I might even say that in spite of all the splendid training I've had in teachers' college and the university—I took my Ph.D. last summer, you know—that the major part of all I know about teaching I've learned at these state gatherings."

Miss Preston now subsided and applied herself with some diligence to her dinner. Mr. Bremble, pondering, sat silent. He knew little about modern education and realized that he could not pronounce upon it as an expert, but he was acutely aware that Miss Preston as an educator of the young did not appeal to him. Clackety-clack, thought Mr. Bremble resentfully. Clackety-clackety-clackety-clack.

Casting his mind back over his own school days, he remembered teachers he had liked and teachers he had disliked. He remembered the chalky smell of erasers being dusted, and the glint of a little gold star on his spelling paper when it was perfect, and the leap of the heart as the teacher pasted it on. But he could remember nothing of the things Miss Preston praised, and he had no conception whatever of what she meant by grading on the curve.

Indeed, what Mr. Bremble found himself remembering most vividly had nothing to do with school, but was an incident that went behind his school days, an incident occurring at a time, he now supposed, when he ought to have been in kindergarten, having his intelligence measured and a normal curve of achievement set up for him.

There had been no kindergarten in his little home town. But he had been an insatiably curious and inquiring child,

urgently asking his mother at every new sight, "What does it do, Mother? What does it do?" And his mother had told him what it did, whenever she happened to know, and he had taken the information away and pondered it. Accordingly, when first he noticed that people picked up books and papers and looked at them, sometimes for quite a while, he had tugged again at his mother's skirts, pointing to the book or the paper. "What does it do, Mother?" he had asked her.

So she began teaching him to read. To little Henry Bremble it was a fascinating game, but for a time he made no connection between the printed characters and the life about him. Then one day she took him for a walk, and his roving eyes fell upon a bright new sign hanging over a cobbler's door.

He tugged at his mother's skirt, pointing. "What does it do, Mother? What does it—"

But then he halted, spellbound, for before his eyes the sign spread, shaped itself, flickered, and made words. It made three words. The words said: "Shoes Shined Here."

Little Henry Bremble stopped still in his tracks. His eyes widened. He trembled, and his mouth came slowly open. "Mother!" he breathed after a moment, incredulously. And, as she looked down at him, he whispered, "Mother, it reads what it does!" He yanked at her skirt once more, ecstatically. "Mother, the sign, look there! It reads what it does!"

He had been less than five years old at the time. But he still remembered the bursting radiance of that moment. It was certainly the moment in which he had learned to read. It was certainly the moment when he had set his grimy little hand on the knob of the long-locked door, when he had started on his stubby little feet down the long, shining

corridor that was to lead him forth at last into the magic garden of the English poets, his comforters and his tormentors, his reproach and his delight.

But it had little to do, he supposed, with education. There was not much method in it.

The others had risen from the table and were looking at him. He rose hastily, dropping his napkin, and as he stooped to pick it up they went past him, murmuring, to the living room. "I'm so glad you could come tonight, Nellie," Amelia was saying affectionately. "You're such a stranger nowadays; I hardly ever see you."

"I know," Miss Preston replied with a rueful smile. "And I miss you too, Amelia, very much. But teaching, you know, is a pretty serious business." They were out of the room now, but Mr. Bremble heard her patient sigh. "It's the parents, I tell you, Amelia, more than anything."

* 5 *

M R. BREMBLE had been, on the whole, rather fortunate in his parents. He could not remember that they had ever bothered him much. To be sure, he could not remember, either, that he had ever thought much about them, and certainly he had never felt toward his father that swelling of admiration popularly supposed to cause the sprouting male to imitate his sire, to wish to be like him. The last thing he had ever wanted was to be like his father, who, though always gentle and amiable, had been a somewhat ineffectual little man. Mr. Bremble himself had never felt ineffectual in his life.

As he put this idea to himself, a pricking unease assailed him. Was it possible—why, but was it possible, was it conceivable—that his father had never felt ineffectual either?

He halted before this entirely new and rather uncomfortable possibility. He saw the resultant syllogism only too clearly, and he could feel his ears slowly reddening. "Well, but—" he protested resentfully. "Well, but—"

He blinked, startled, for it seemed to him that for the merest moment he saw God's face looking down benignly; and as he watched, and opened his mouth to make his pro-

test vocal, God's right eyelid unmistakably drooped and rose again.

The astonishment he felt that God should have winked at him covered, for the time, his own confusion. Then, as the vision disappeared, he felt his ears redden again, but not unpleasantly, and a slow but increasing tremor spread over his face. "Well!" thought Mr. Bremble, smiling. "Well, what do you know about that!" And he laughed aloud.

This revelation, or discovery, or whatever it was, made a surprising difference in Mr. Bremble's inner life. He could not tell why, but it gave a sparkle to existence. And, by some odd connection he could never then or thereafter fathom, it removed from him one of the heaviest inhibitions his life had hitherto known—the inhibition against naming the buttons in his button collection.

Why shouldn't he name his buttons if he wanted to? He was amazed at his former hesitation, and could only suppose that he had been looking at the matter through Amelia's eyes, seeing it in the light of her interminable pronunciamentos. Undoubtedly, to Amelia, the christening of a set of buttons for one's family and acquaintances would have signified a step toward madness, but why, he now asked himself excitedly, should his, Henry Bremble's, activities be molded by Amelia's pattern?

Mr. Bremble quite quivered with eagerness to get at his button collection. He thought yearningly of one particular button, a hideous small affair in black bone with scummy brownish edges, and he felt that he could scarcely wait to get his fingers on it. "Horace Widdinger!" he would call it, poking it ruthlessly about the table with a pencil. "Horace Widdinger!" The very thought of it made him swell with a conqueror's joy.

Fortune, for once, was in a favor-granting mood, for Memorial Day was about to dawn and there would be no work at the office. He could count on privacy for several hours at least, for Amelia and her mother would be going to take part in some civic demonstration or other in the early afternoon.

The morning of Memorial Day hung heavy upon him. He spent some two hours of it working in the garden without being reminded to do so, which surprised Amelia but pleased her very much, so that she did not too vehemently insist on his going with her to the celebration. At eleven o'clock he could find no more to do. Dusting his hands together, he cast a final invidious glance at the marigolds, went into the house, took a bath, dressed himself neatly, and went for a walk to kill the remaining time.

As he turned, from long habit, in the direction of the old Paterson place, he was not sure whether he hoped again to see the woman in white, or whether he would not prefer to find the place uninhabited as before. He was assuredly glad that he had seen her once; she had made a charming and unforgettable picture. If he saw her again, or perhaps heard her speak, might not the picture be destroyed forever?

Suppose he came upon her scolding her maid in the garden. . . . She had looked gentle and delicate enough to assure him that her scolding would not be couched in fish-wife language, but this, though something, was far from being enough. A scolding was a scolding in any language, and Mr. Bremble disliked scoldings.

But he did see her again, and the Negro maid as well. They were sitting in the summerhouse together, shelling peas.

Mr. Bremble slowed his steps. She was not scolding her

maid, for they were laughing. They made rather a pretty picture, sitting there so companionably, and the peas they were shelling seemed remarkably fine peas. Mr. Bremble knew that he was not near enough to smell the peas, and yet he did smell them—sweet, promising and earth-born, with pods as green as emeralds and smooth as folded satin.

His mind flew back to a German picture book his father had once brought him, a picture story of a little princess in a forest. Dew-maidens in pale blue gowns with little white caps and aprons had come and bathed the princess and brushed out her long smooth flowing golden hair, and then several attentive little boys clothed in dark green moss had arrived with her breakfast—a comb of honey with the sunlight slanting through it, tiny crullers in a brown earthen bowl, and a flagon of fresh sweet milk. Never had food so sung to Mr. Bremble until now. These peas, as he watched them pour through the dark hands and the white, had, like the princess's honeycomb, a look of sacrament, and for the second time in his life Mr. Bremble recognized food as the gift of God, and briefly bowed his head.

He walked on, very slowly, so as not to miss anything—the hot sun blazing starlike through the cloudy, clinging vines, the crisp light sound of splitting pods, the two contrasted faces alight with enjoyment. As he drew near, the white woman said something and smiled, and the dark one flung back her head and emitted a rich, loud whoop of tropical glee. "Whooee!" she shouted breathlessly, between convulsions. "Miss Iris, now ain't you a doozy!"

The other woman laughed too, necessarily, but she put forth a cautioning hand. "It wasn't that funny, my dear—Clarissa, look out!"

But it was too late; the peas cascaded to the floor. Clarissa dived for them; so did Miss Iris; their heads collided sharply. They recoiled, massaging the bumped areas, stared at each other, and laughed again before they bent, more carefully this time, to gather up the peas.

Mr. Bremble turned around, smiling. He had another picture now, and he had better go home at once, before anything happened to spoil it. But he still walked slowly, dreading to pass the limit of the picket fence, whose very palings, slowly rotting in the sun, seemed to him invested with happy significance. He walked very slowly, indeed, and that was how he happened to find the button.

The button lay half-hidden in the grass beside the walk. He picked it up and looked at it and knew it was hers. It was a large pearl button like a shallow inverted bowl; its surface was not broken by thread-holes in a trench, for it had a metal eyelet on its reverse side instead. It lay in Mr. Bremble's hand, smooth, lustrous and rich with enchantment, glowing now with rose, now with blue, now with violet or soft faint green; and sometimes, as he turned it, as white as milk in moonlight. It was the most beautiful button, Mr. Bremble thought, that he had ever seen. And he would name it Miss Iris.

His thought of returning it to her he put at once out of his mind. It was possible that she might miss it, though try as he might he could not conceive of her as ever standing in any real need of buttons. Her clothes, he felt, were like the house's furniture; they grew on her, they could not have been put together from pieces of cloth. His own need was surely far greater than hers.

It was incredible, felt Mr. Bremble, that her name should

be Miss Iris. Anything so perfect was improbable on the face of it. But Miss Iris was what Clarissa had called her, and Miss Iris should be the button's name.

He carried the button all the way home in his hand, not putting it into his pocket where he would lose the touch of it. Perhaps, he thought, a little separate box—Amelia, who saved everything, must have small boxes around the house. And he would have all the afternoon to rummage.

He found the box without difficulty, a small, square white one that must have contained what Amelia called costume jewelry, for it was lined with some pale satiny material. Miss Iris looked enchanting, lying on it. "Beautiful," Mr. Bremble murmured to himself, and from force of habit added, "Beau, belt, felt, left—"

But for the first time the word itself held more of satisfaction than the words he made out of it. He went back to it whole and rounded, and turned it back and forth in his mind as he had turned the button to and from the light. 'Beautiful—beautiful—beautiful—" he murmured again and again, scarcely aware, in the rapture of his dream, that the afternoon light was steadily descending. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful—"

In the bottom of the common box, his dingy edges consorting in lewd complacency with the green and buxom curves of Mrs. Corey, lurked Horace Widdinger, evil but forgotten.

* 6 *

THE corporeal Mr. Widdinger, Mr. Bremble learned next day to his stunned delight, was taking an early vacation this year. He got away with only a few patronizing and hilarious last words and admonitions to his little friend Henrietta, who, he said, would be sure to miss him sorely and must be strengthened.

"Ain't that right, Henrietta? Haw, haw, haw!" He turned to the rest of the staff to make sure of approval. "Makes a lot of difference to Henrietta when I'm not around, believe me. Three whole weeks he'll have to get along without me. He won't know what to do with himself."

Mr. Bremble, busily making words out of words, said nothing. It was true enough that Mr. Widdinger's absence would make a substantial difference to him, but Mr. Widdinger was quite wrong in supposing that he would not know what to do with himself. Mr. Bremble knew quite well what he would do. He would breathe freely, for a change, not occasionally, between attacks, but all through his office day, while Mr. Widdinger was gone. He would seize upon the silence and the peace and eat them from his hands like cake. He would gloat upon them, feast upon them,

neglecting his work, if necessary, in order to do so. A little neglected work could always be caught up. But there would be no compensation for him if he wasted, for the sake of work or anything else, one hour, one moment, one ineffable second of the Edenic bliss he knew he would feel when Mr. Widdinger's coattails finally disappeared through the outer door of the office.

There were always Amelia, Mrs. Corey, and Queenie, of course, but Amelia just now was too deep in her plans for the party to give him her attention as usual, and Mrs. Corey was nearly as deeply involved. Queenie, he remembered hopefully, was suffering at present from a sharp attack of asthma. The vacation this year promised to be even more delightful than usual.

It was always more delightful than his own two weeks of leisure, for then he had Amelia with him, and usually her mother and the dog as well. This time there seemed nothing more annoying to expect than the ceaseless arguing of the women over party preparations, decorations, and the possible effect upon this lady or that of each separate innovation Amelia or her mother thought of introducing to impress them.

Mr. Bremble could not quite make out why the League for Democracy felt it important to whisper and comment on the shape of a napkin or the quality of the tassel on a score card, but he supposed there were aspects of democracy connected with these things that his mind was not capable of grasping. In any case, he had nothing to do with it all, and his conscience was clear. He had got Amelia the tally cards at last—a little red schoolhouse design, surely safely emblematic of American tolerance, the melting pot, and the pioneer spirit—and Amelia, relieved that he had not

indulged any of his own eccentric notions in buying them, had not been very severe at his forgetting to place no emphasis on the color red.

Everything, therefore, seemed to point toward his enjoying Mr. Widdinger's vacation, and he was proportionately disturbed, on returning home at the end of its second day, to find his womenfolk sputtering with displeasure over something entirely new.

At first, amid the excited babble of their voices, he could not distinguish the tumult from the theme; but later, as they became simultaneously more emphatic and more coherent, he gathered that it concerned the church they attended. The new pastor of the church, a young man named Anderson, had closed its neighborhood mission to the poor. Mr. Bremble knew the pastor only by sight, a thin, earnest young man who was always in a hurry.

He was somewhat surprised at Amelia's agitation. Himself unchurched, he had no interest in formal religion beyond a private, passionate devotion to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, whose pure and lofty language never failed to stir him. There were some of the collects, notably the one for Ascension Day, that literally lifted him out of himself and into a sphere of steep and holy silence, where even the choiring of angels would have been amiss. "Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe Thy only-begotten son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens, so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with Him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth—"

It was not necessary, Mr. Bremble felt, to believe a word of what this language said in order to be so lifted and sublimated by it. It was poetry, pure and simple, of the highest

sort, and as poetry he regarded and loved it. Remembering it as Amelia and Mrs. Corey continued to ejaculate, he knew a moment of peace in the midst of it all.

His surprise at the sudden hubbub in his home was due to the fact that Amelia, although a regular and conventional attendant at church on Sundays, should be exercised at all about the mission. She had never been a really passionate church worker, for her other clubs took far too much of her time. He had thought her scarcely more interested than himself. He had seldom heard her comment on the services beyond a perfunctory remark about the "lovely sermon" given them that morning by Mr. Curtis, young Mr. Anderson's predecessor in office; but now he realized that he had heard no such comments lately. Probably Mr. Anderson had been suspect from the beginning.

Such, apparently, was the case. "I never liked him, never," Amelia declared vehemently, tapping an irritated foot against the floor. "I knew the minute I saw him he could never take Mr. Curtis's place."

Mr. Bremble devoutly hoped not. He had too vivid a memory of Mr. Curtis, bowing and smiling and shaking hands, his unctuous voice proclaiming what his coarse-cut face and curving belly denied. "What made Anderson close the mission?" he asked mildly in the first moment of comparative silence.

"He says the mission isn't far enough from the church to be needed. He says the mission people can just as well come to church and would prefer to. I've no doubt they would prefer to!" Amelia snapped, tapping her foot. "But what about the rest of us, I'd like to know? Does he imagine we're going to put up with being forced to associate every Sunday with the ragtag and bobtail from the other side of the tracks?

If the session doesn't have something to say to him I miss my guess. He's been asking for it with every word he's spoken since the first day he ever stood up in that pulpit!"

Mrs. Corey nodded ponderously. "Your daddy always used to say, 'Young people think all old people are fools, but old people *know* all young people are!' Don't worry, Amelia, my fine young laddy-buck will hear plenty from Judge Binns and Mr. Corbett about this latest crackpot notion of his, or I miss my guess, same as you." She nodded again, decisively, and looked with sudden anxiety at the drooping Queenie. "D'you think she'd eat a little milk toast, maybe, if you was to make it for her?"

But Amelia had no time to consider Queenie. "And that's not all," she told her meditative husband. "Mr. Anderson came here—here to this house—he hadn't been gone ten minutes when you came—and what for, if you please? He came to ask Mother and me to serve on a welcoming committee!"

Mr. Bremble knitted his brows. "A welcoming committee?"

"Yes, a welcoming committee!" Amelia shouted at him. "Are you deaf, Henry? He wanted us to organize some of the ladies to meet these people and help them get over their first embarrassment—"

"Embarrassment!" sniffed Mrs. Corey, her attention momentarily distracted from the wheezing Queenie. "Hmf! Dear me, that's too bad about their embarrassment, now isn't it? Yes 'a was!" she crooned to the restless dog.

Mr. Bremble cleared his throat. "I suppose," he said mildly, "all things considered, it would be embarrassing for them—"

"Naturally it would be embarrassing for them!" Amelia

agreed with heat. "Entirely aside from the feelings of all the rest of us at such an outrage—"

Mr. Bremble could not forbear a timid protest. "Outrage, Amelia?"

She glared at him. "Outrage is what I said, and outrage is exactly what I meant, Henry. Entirely aside from the outrage to our feelings, what about those poor people themselves? If he wants to be so all-fired generous with his invitations, he might at least stop and think what it will do to them. They'll be afraid to come, or, if they aren't, the rest of us certainly won't come, and where does he think he's going to get a congregation, I'd like to know? Who pays him his salary, just tell me that, if you can! Of all the insolence!"

"What'd you tell him?" Mr. Bremble asked. "About the welcoming committee, I mean?"

Mrs. Corey emitted a rich chuckle. "She told him all right, didn't she, Queenie?" she crooned fondly. "You bet she told him!"

Amelia looked at her. "I was perfectly courteous, Mother," she said. Mrs. Corey chuckled again, and Amelia turned back to her husband. "What do you think I told him? I told him—I was perfectly courteous, perfectly—that maybe if he'd wait until he was dry behind the ears he'd have a clearer idea of what a congregation expects of a minister. I told him yes, he'd been correctly informed, I was active in a number of organizations, but they were all for right and recognized purposes, not for the tearing down of a church I've supported all my life, and my parents and grandparents before me, and that I'd always supposed stood for something in the community. I told him that if he imagined all he had to do was come to me and ask me to

serve on a welcoming committee to a lot of factory hands and their wives and I'd jump at the chance of tearing down everything I've helped to build up—”

She paused for very lack of breath, and a moment later, as Mr. Bremble did not reply, took herself offendedly off to the kitchen to prepare a belated dinner. Mrs. Corey, nursing Queenie, gathered herself up and followed.

Mr. Bremble sat on in meditation for a time, and then rose suddenly, for he had caught sight of a sheet of paper fallen against the baseboard near the door. He picked it up and looked at it.

It was a typewritten sheet, and for a moment he was puzzled, for the house did not contain a typewriter. The minister must have dropped it on his way out.

He carried it quietly up to the bedroom and read it. It seemed to be a psalm of sorts, though none that he recognized.

Hasten my steps, O God; for I walk toward Thy temple. I lay in darkness, and the darkness was very great; the clouds and the blackness of night were about me on every side.

But Thou hast set light upon the far horizon; Thou spreadest Thy day at my feet.

The wind of the morning sweepeth the world, and the breath of Thy voice is in it.

I said, I will ascend unto the Lord in the early part of the day; with a glad mind will I worship Him while it is yet morning.

My soul praiseth Thee, O God, my soul praiseth Thee for Thy goodness; my soul is glad and giveth thanks for the multitude of Thy bounties.

Extend these bounties, O God, even to the poorest and meanest of Thy children; with Thine own hand feed them, and bring them before Thy countenance. Let the glory of Thy countenance shine upon them, that they may enter into their heritage.

Look upon them, O God, and receive their petitions; for it is Thou only, O Lord, who takest away our hunger.

The typing ended here, and Mr. Bremble, for a moment embarrassed as if he had caught himself peering in at a private window, laid it down on his knee and considered. Ought he to return it, perhaps, to Mr. Anderson?

But no, he could not be sure it would not discomfit him. Better to let it be lost. Mr. Anderson was young. He would write other psalms, if he kept his ardor.

It was not such a bad psalm, Mr. Bremble thought, though youthful. It held a quality he himself knew well—the silent passion of solitude and thought. His own solitary musings could never have taken just this form, but the feeling behind them was as familiar as his own breath. It came from a world like the world he found within himself—a peaceful world, unracked by contention, unsullied by hate. But it came, too, from a world in which courage stood shining. Mr. Anderson's world was a braver world than his own.

He remembered the moment of God's recent visitation, when God had suddenly ascended from the comfortable level on which He usually conducted His visits to the awful majesty of an offended king. Was this perhaps the way Mr. Anderson knew him, this alone? If so, no wonder the poor young man looked anxious and strained. Mr. Bremble felt a wistful desire to introduce Mr. Anderson to God as he

knew Him, but he sensibly restrained it. God knew His own business best, and no doubt He had His own plans for Mr. Anderson. Mr. Bremble was sure He would have liked the young man's psalm.

He read it over again, lingeringly, then deliberately tore it into bits and stuffed it into his pocket, to be disposed of next day at the office. "Poor young fellow," he thought as he put it away, for none knew better than he that young Mr. Anderson, with not even a wife to stand by him, was pursuing a perilous way. "Yes, God would have liked it all right, I make no doubt. But I don't suppose the congregation would."

* 7 *

THE rumblings and thunderings loosed about him by Mr. Anderson's imprudence died slowly, but they died, and Mr. Bremble, seeing Amelia and her mother go back to their bridge party planning with only an occasional outburst or scornful sniff directed churchward, drew a long breath. If it had to happen while Mr. Widdinger was away, it was a good thing, at least, that it had happened early. Most of the three weeks remained to him after all.

But he had no sooner reached this conclusion than he became aware, in the unwonted quiet of the office, that something was wrong. Willy Wilson looked sullen and defiant, and Susy Jennings looked frightened. Twice he saw her crying against the hard green metal of her filing-cabinet, and three times she walked into him in the corridor, not even seeming to see him. And once, to his great discomfiture, he inadvertently came in upon a quarrel between them.

"Din' I tell you?" Willy shouted, striding. "You answer me! Din' I tell you the guy was a low-down—"

"Oh, hush up, Willy," Susy gulped, drying her eyes. "Yes; all right, all *right*, you told me, you told me—"

"Didn' I tell you a hundred thousand' times—"

Willy stopped abruptly, seeing Mr. Bremble, and both of them turned away and pretended to work.

Mr. Bremble, settling uneasily to his own tasks, told himself that he had no concern with the troubles of Willy and Susy. Whatever it was that ailed them they probably deserved. In all likelihood it was nothing, if you came to consider it—just another of the endless vitriolic outbursts nearly everyone he knew found it stimulating to produce. At least, Mr. Bremble supposed they found it stimulating; else why go on and on and on, tearing at each other like fighting cocks, spitting at each other like cats? He put the matter decisively out of his mind.

But he was not to escape, it seemed, so easily. All afternoon, from time to time, he could feel Susy's eyes bent on his carefully turned back, and when at five o'clock he got up and was about to go home, she stopped him. Willy had flung himself out of the office at the stroke of the hour, still muttering with rage.

"Mr. Bremble," said Susy Jennings faintly.

He stiffened himself, turned round, and looked at her; and as he looked he knew that he was about to be dragged into yet another disturbance of his peace, and a serious one at that. Her shallow eyes held tragedy, no less.

"Yes, Miss Jennings?" he replied dispassionately.

"Mr. Bremble—" She paused, hesitated, wrenching her mouth into the semblance of a smile. "I wish you'd call me Susy, Mr. Bremble."

You do, do you? Mr. Bremble thought. But aloud he said, "Well, all right. I will if you want me to. What is it, Susy?"

"Have you time to talk with me just a few minutes, Mr. Bremble?" Susy sank into the chair he had just vacated. "It won't take but a few minutes of your time. I thought—I

thought——” She swallowed. “You always seem so kind, Mr. Bremble, and I didn’t know anyone else to go to. I—I’m in trouble, Mr. Bremble.”

A blush, not of the surface but seeming to rise from the lining of his vital organs, suffused Mr. Bremble as he realized, in one swift moment, what Susy’s trouble was. His first reaction was a fastidious shrinking; his second, immediately engulfing the first, was an overwhelming fury. She had picked a fine person to apply to in a situation like that! For days, for months, for years even, had she not, at every possible opportunity, added the spiteful pin-flick of her laughter to the lash Mr. Widdinger wielded? Had she not gurgled like a junior devil in admiration of her overlord, that devil of devils, as he roasted Mr. Bremble on his pitchfork? And now, when like any gutter-gamin of the slums, she had got herself “in trouble,” did she not come crawling to him, who wanted nothing of her but her silence, on no strength but that of her impression that he always seemed kind?

Mr. Bremble felt anything but kind. For a blazing moment he felt like Jahve, that old grim God of battle and revenge, and he heard a deep strong voice cry out within him, “Let her be stoned with stones through the streets of the city, for she hath defiled My temple!”

Long before this lightning rage subsided Susy had gone on with her tale. “And I have money, enough for an operation, you know, he gave it to me before he left——”

A second shock, this time as cold as a wave of ice-water, struck Mr. Bremble, turning him to salty ice. He knew it as surely as if she had pronounced the name. Horace Widdinger.

It was Horace Widdinger she was talking about. Horace

Widdinger had used her and finished with her and given her money, and she came to ask him, Henry Bremble, to tell her what to do.

"If I just had some place I could go," Susy wailed, wadding her handkerchief into a ball. "I don't want an operation—I'd rather have the baby, if I could just see how to do it! But I have to make a living, and I'm sick—"

"Where do your parents live?" Mr. Bremble asked sternly.

"Ohio." She gulped, looking away from him.

"Then hadn't you better go home and tell your mother?"

"My mother? I'd die first." She looked at him, sneering. "I guess you don't know much about mothers, Mr. Bremble."

He looked at her. She looked back at him. The sneer had left her face, and her shadowed eyes lay cupped in her face like basins, waiting for his alms to be dropped into them. "I guess I don't," he said dryly but not urgently.

Susy swallowed again. "I just thought you might be able to tell me some place to go," she said after a moment. "I won't go to one of those charity places. I'll have an operation first. If I could get some place where they would let me help in the house—I thought maybe Mrs. Bremble—"

At this Mr. Bremble suppressed an insane desire to bark with laughter. You'd get small quarter from Amelia, my girl, he thought. But he said nothing.

Susy drooped before him in the chair, the firm lines of her young body wilted and blurred with weakness.

That was the crux of the matter, felt Mr. Bremble. Whatever she was or was not, she had a body, and bodies, he knew from sundry painful experiences of his own, could suffer. What was it women always said about childbirth—something about the Valley of the Shadow? Exaggerated, no

doubt, for woman's greater glory. Still, there must be a considerable amount of pain to account for the comparison in the first place.

It was the body of Susy Jennings and not her child that swayed him. Little of good, he felt, could be accomplished by helping the child of Susy Jennings and Horace Widdinger into the world. But when it came to pain, excruciating pain—

That this young flesh should be swollen and torn with anguish, that it should bleed and quiver and cry out, this was already inevitable; and was it not enough and more than enough? That the body of Susy Jennings, or of any other girl, should be submitted to the obscene horrors of the "operation" she spoke of so glibly— Mr. Bremble closed his eyes.

When he opened them again she was still looking at him, and in spite of all his grimness there was trust in her eyes. Incredibly, she still expected him to do something about it. But how was he to know what could be done? "I don't know just what to tell you to do about it, Susy," he said at last.

She spread her handkerchief out upon her knee. "I just thought maybe some of your wife's friends—"

Mrs. Baker? Mrs. Cable? Mrs. Carruthers? Mrs. Prince? Again Mr. Bremble felt a tearing impulse to harsh laughter. "I don't think so," he said in measured tones, shaking his head. "No, I'm afraid not, Susy."

She rose, putting the sodden handkerchief into her purse. "Well, would you just—would you just think about it, Mr. Bremble?" she pleaded desperately. "There's plenty of time yet, I think—it's only three months—"

Mr. Bremble winced, but he nodded. "All right. I will if you want me to, Susy."

He thought perhaps he ought to reassure her, at least to the extent of patting her shoulder, but he found, when he had tried, that he could not touch her. "I'll think about it," he promised again, and went home.

And he did think about it. The devil of it was that he could think of nothing else. Two nights later, after endless cogitation and two days of watching her mope about the office, looking at him from time to time with that maddening trust in her eyes, he cautiously sounded Amelia out on the subject. "Amelia," he said tentatively, over the evening paper.

She looked up from the napkin she was embroidering for the tournament party. "Hm?"

"These organizations you work with—I was just wondering." He paused and chose his words. "Do any of them have anything to do with taking care of girls who—you know—"

Amelia pursed her lips. "Girls who go wrong, you mean? No, I'm thankful to say they don't. I've been mighty careful to steer clear of that sort of thing."

"Make their own beds," put in Mrs. Corey briskly, feeding Queenie a chocolate. "Let 'em lie in 'em. Isn't that right, Queenie?" She tilted Queenie's hairy face up for a resounding kiss, and turned to Amelia. "Remember, Amelia, that girl that used to work for me—Bessie Brown? I sent her a-kitin' when I found out the fix she was in, didn't I? Your daddy didn't think I ought to. Men!" She sniffed contemptuously, apparently unaware that she had publicized a disagreement with the infallibly agreeable Mr. Corey.

Amelia nodded. "Yes, I remember. . . . What put such a thing into your head, Henry?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are a good many stories in the papers," Mr. Bremble offered lamely. "Here's one right now,

in tonight's," he added with a brief but fervent prayer of thanksgiving. "A girl—"

"Let me see it." Amelia took the paper and scanned it briefly. "Tchk, tchk, tchk!" She gave the paper back to Mr. Bremble in the manner of one ridding herself of offal. "Well, of course there are organizations that take care of things like that, though, as I say, I've always preferred to give whatever time and energy I have to helping decent people, not—" Amelia checked herself. "There's an institution not fifty miles from here, the Helping Hand—surely you must have heard of it, Henry—that takes in such girls and gives them a place to live until after their babies are born. I've seen it—I went there once with a committee of ladies. It's really quite a wonderful place."

Mr. Bremble was interested. "What's it like?"

Amelia's organizational interest kindled. "Well, it's a little like a hospital—or a school, perhaps. Of course, as the girls aren't ill they're able to work, and there's no sense in pauperizing them—"

Mr. Bremble wrinkled his brow. "Pauperizing them?"

"Why, yes; giving them something for nothing. That's never good, you know; it's one of the first principles of philanthropy. I remember one of the ladies said to me at the time how much better it was for them to be actively employed and making some return for all that was done for them."

"What sort of work do they do?"

"Whatever needs to be done—scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, or whatever is needed. The place runs like clockwork. I just thought to myself, as I stood there and watched them at work in their nice neat uniforms—"

"Uniforms?"

"Certainly, uniforms—the institution has to pay for clothing them, doesn't it? They wear a sort of gray cambric uniform made like a Hoover apron."

"All of them?" asked Mr. Bremble, dismayed.

"Certainly. Where would be the sense or justice in making distinctions?"

"But not all the time, surely," protested Mr. Bremble hopefully. "When they go out—"

"They don't go out. They aren't allowed to. Everything they need is supplied them by the Home. Well, as I was saying, I stood there and watched them a long time, and I thought to myself, it's probably the first time in their lives most of them ever looked halfway decent. But do you think they appreciate it? Not at all. The superintendent herself—such an efficient woman—told me they complain continually because they aren't allowed lipstick and rouge. Now I ask you! But there's no satisfying that sort of people, whatever you do for them, and when you go out of your way to help them you needn't expect any thanks, or even any common courtesy. Lipstick, forsooth!"

"Smearin' themselves like Jezebels," placidly contributed Mrs. Corey.

Amelia nodded. "Oh, yes. You can see without half trying that they're only waiting until they get out of the Home to go right back to their former way of living. Of course, they aren't allowed to leave until six months after their babies are born, even if they give the babies out for adoption."

"They aren't?" interrupted Mr. Bremble. "Why not?"

Again Amelia showed impatience. "For goodness' sake, Henry, these things cost money! You've never looked into the cost of organizational activities, but I have, and I know what I'm talking about. The institution loses several weeks

of every girl's services as it is, and of course that can't very well be avoided. If an organization gives a girl every comfort in a situation like that over a period of months, the least it can ask in return—”

Mr. Bremble cleared his throat. “Do the girls—would you say—I mean, did you get the impression that they were contented there? Did they seem happy, Amelia?”

“Happy?” Amelia laughed acidly. “Dear me, I'm sure I don't know, Henry. Their situation is one that hardly—”

Mr. Bremble amended his question. “Yes, I see what you mean, Amelia. Maybe ‘hopeful’ would be better. Do the girls seem to look forward to anything, planning their lives after they get out, or—”

“I saw no signs of it.” Amelia shrugged. “But I dare say they have their plans—of a sort.”

“You just bet they do,” chortled Mrs. Corey.

Mr. Bremble, unwontedly persistent, pushed his inquiry further. “You said they gave them every comfort, Amelia. Now it seems to me the biggest comfort you could give a girl like that would be to help her to see her future a little more clearly, to know what she wants to do, both for herself and for her baby.” He paused. “Does the institution do anything about clearing matters up for them, so that they can be easy in their minds? I mean—”

“Certainly it does. There are chapel exercises every day, and attendance is compulsory unless a girl is actually too ill to attend. What more do you want?”

“Well—” Mr. Bremble hesitated. “I don't know, Amelia, but it seems to me it wouldn't do much harm to let them have their rouge and lipsticks if they want them. It all sounds a little dreary the way you describe it—”

"Dreary!" Amelia bridled. "If dreariness is all they've got to complain of, let them thank their lucky stars!"

"They're pretty young, most of them," Mr. Bremble continued patiently, "aren't they?"

Amelia looked at him offendedly. "I'm sure I don't know. I suppose so."

Mr. Bremble nodded, feeling his way cautiously. "Well, that's what I mean. They're cut off from all their natural pleasures for more than a year as it is, and of course that can't be helped. But it seems to me, maybe, that rouge and lipstick mean more to a young girl than just painting her face. One day I saw a young girl at—at the office—doing up her face after a fit of crying, and she looked like a different girl when she was through. If somebody had taken away her rouge and lipstick just then when she thought she needed them most, I imagine she'd have taken a great deal longer to get over whatever it was that bothered her."

Amelia laughed airily. "Dear me, Henry, I had no idea you were such an expert in feminine psychology! I'm not saying you're entirely wrong where decent girls are concerned, but those creatures! If doing without rouge and lipstick makes them cry, I don't see that anybody else has any reason to be concerned. They'll probably be all the better for having their pride humbled a little."

Mr. Bremble doubted it. That the humbling of pride might be salutary if it came from within he was prepared to admit, but he had never known any benefit to result from humiliation deliberately imposed. And on this subject, if on no other—Mr. Bremble thought bitterly of Horace Widinger—he was qualified to have an opinion of his own.

Amelia's picture of conditions at the Helping Hand,

though drawn with meager strokes, had been all too abundantly filled in by his ready imagination. He saw the hapless girls, tight and toiling; mutinous in their depressing gray uniforms; confined to their quarters month after weary month; eating the bitter bread of patronage and expected to say grace for it; hungry for friendship, for comfort, for reassurance, and finding them nowhere; licked from head to foot, from morning to night, by the blistering fires of shame.

For if they had not been ashamed when they entered the Helping Hand, thought Mr. Bremble, surely they were all ashamed by now; nor need their shame have much to do with the catastrophe that had brought them there. Mr. Bremble, inwardly shuddering, recalled Amelia's bland announcement that she had stood there and looked at them a long time. And fed them peanuts, perhaps? God, he could almost think her capable of it.

He tried to be fair. The Helping Hand was better than nothing, he supposed. But when he had admitted so much he could admit no more.

Amelia, he could see, had no conception of the girls as girls. To her they were "creatures"; creatures who had done a thing she would not herself have done, and therefore outside the pale not only of decency but almost of humanity.

He had scarcely formulated the thought before she confirmed it. "You're all wrong, Henry," she said definitively, "in trying to judge these girls by ordinary standards. It's just what I'm always telling you, you never get below the surface. How in the world do you expect decent standards of morality to be maintained if you make no difference between right and wrong? Whatever the girls at the Helping Hand have or don't have, they certainly have a great deal

more than they have any right to expect after their disgraceful behavior. Rouge and lipstick!" She twitched impatiently. "I suppose, if you were doing it, you'd give them silk stockings as well."

"I don't know but what I would," said Henry Bremble.

Amelia looked at him severely over her glasses. "Don't be trivial, Henry. It's no laughing matter, and it's in very bad taste to joke about such things. Let's change the subject, or keep still if this is all we can find to talk about. How do you like this corner, Mother?" She held up the napkin. "I think it's quite pretty, myself."

Mrs. Corey reached a fatted claw for the napkin and nodded. "'Tis," she agreed. "You got it right pretty, Amelia."

Amelia, taking it back, smiled and relaxed. "I think so," she said complacently. "You watch Mrs. Carruthers when she sees them, Mother—now remember."

* 8 *

M^{R.} BREMBLE sank back in his chair, hiding behind the paper. He felt a renewed exasperation that Susy had appealed to him, surely the unlikeliest person she could have known, to help her with her problem.

Sleep, for the most of that night, was impossible to him, and so it continued to be night after night, as one by one the golden, unrecapturable days of Horace Widdinger's vacation wore themselves away. He lost his appetite; he paced the floor. Amelia, becoming restive, reproved him for acting like a chicken with its head cut off, and repeatedly demanded his reasons for so doing. He could not work at his crosswords, he could not make words out of words, and he forgot his buttons altogether, even the beautiful one he had named Miss Iris.

And the buttons, unfortunately, were by no means all he forgot. He forgot letters he was supposed to post, errands he was supposed to do, commissions he was supposed to execute, and responsive sounds he was supposed to make. He forgot to bring home Queenie's regular allowance of liver, although he knew that she and Mrs. Corey would be dining with him and Amelia. He forgot to wipe his feet before he stepped on Amelia's clean floor. He forgot, successively,

to hang up his dressing gown, to water the marigolds, to rinse out the bathtub, to mow the front lawn, and to get someone to mend the cellar door. And, as Mr. Widdinger's vacation wound to a close, and there was added to his mounting anxieties the certain knowledge that he would soon be forced to confront Mr. Widdinger, in the light of his recent knowledge, and be addressed waggishly by him as Henrietta, he reached the nadir of all ineptitude and forgot to kiss Amelia on the cheek before going to work.

Naturally, Amelia was at her wits' end by this time, for he stubbornly refused to explain his erratic behavior. Her frightened, almost helpless "What's got *into* you, Henry?" became a daily refrain.

Desperately, almost as a last resort, she tried her own panacea on him and made an attempt to drive him into an organization. "The Truth Seekers, Henry," she explained to him with a patience all but pathetic. "It has both men and women members, and it meets in the evening. It would be so good for you to lose yourself in work of that kind. Goodness knows I've very little time left over from all I do, but I'm willing to make the effort and go with you if you'll only—"

To her surprise, he reacted with positive violence. "My God, no!"

She began to cry. "I don't see why you have to be so unreasonable, Henry! To swear at me like that, without giving me time to tell you anything about it—"

"I know all I need to know," retorted Mr. Bremble. "Truth Seekers! My God!"

Amelia stared at him through tears. "What possible objection—"

Mr. Bremble withdrew into obstinate silence, refusing to

make his objection vocal. Truth Seekers, indeed. . . . If he knew anything at all, thought Mr. Bremble, he knew that nobody ever need bother to seek for Truth. It was Truth that did the seeking—Truth, the huntress. He had felt her burning spear in his side too often. "Certainly not," he said, and would say no more.

Amelia, baffled, ceased for the time to importune him. But after a number of days of doubt and suspicion, having seen no improvement in her husband's condition, she spent an hour deeply cogitating, consulted at some length with her mother and the imperturbable Queenie, and made up her mind to do something active about it.

"They want me to consult a psychiatrist," Mr. Bremble said uneasily.

"You don't say!" God raised his eyebrows. "What in time do they want you to do that for?"

"I keep forgetting things," Mr. Bremble explained. He looked appealingly and deprecatingly at his Companion. "I don't think they're such very important things, but Amelia does."

"I hate a psychiatrist," God said morosely. "They take altogether too much upon themselves. Did you ever happen to see any of the magazines they publish, with those long strings of—what do they call them?—case reports?"

Mr. Bremble shook his head.

"What I can't understand," continued God, "is where in the world they find all those weird little boys they're always writing about. I've made millions of little boys in My time, and I certainly never made any that were anything like those, unless I was temporarily out of My mind. You don't suppose there's a black market in little boys, do you?"

Mr. Bremble considered it. "I shouldn't think so," he said at last.

God shook his head. "It's beyond Me," He said gloomily. "Well, what are you going to do about it, Henry?"

"I suppose I'll have to go," Mr. Bremble sighed. "Amelia says so."

"Well, don't let them get you down." God rose, preparing to go. He smiled suddenly. "If I were you, Henry, I don't know but I'd have a good look first at some of those magazines. Then, when they start asking you questions, you can govern yourself accordingly. You might as well give them a run for their money, don't you think?"

This seemed to Mr. Bremble an excellent idea. He turned it over and over in his mind, and the more he thought about it the better he liked it. There was a scientific library in the city, he knew, and no doubt it had plenty of the publications God had mentioned.

Amelia was both surprised and pleased at the withdrawal of Mr. Bremble's objections to psychiatric treatment, for indeed he had objected plaintively and long. "You're doing the sensible thing, Henry," she told him approvingly. "In these days, with the almost miraculous resources of modern science at our command, why should we not take every advantage of them? I shall send you, I think, to Dr. Percy Willoughby. He is an analyst as well as a practicing psychiatrist, and I have heard many of the ladies speak very highly of him."

Mr. Bremble had no need to inquire who "the ladies" were. By this inclusive term Amelia always referred to her energetic co-workers in the several causes of democracy, clean politics, and the universal brotherhood of man (subject to exception without notice). "The ladies" bounded all

sides of Amelia's consciousness; and, as she frequently pointed out to him, it was natural and right that they should do so, as anyone could see that they represented the only hope of the world for decency.

"Men!" Amelia was accustomed to pronounce, her eyes burning with a crusader's light. "What have men ever done—what, indeed, can they ever do, so long as they're the way they are—to help make the world a better place to live in? For every welfare organization of men there are twenty organizations of women, all working devotedly—giving the best years of their lives—to building up what men, in their selfishness and greed, keep tearing down—"

"Aren't there any of the ladies who are greedy and selfish, Amelia?" Mr. Bremble had once asked, not in any spirit of controversy but merely as a matter of mild curiosity. "Seems to me I've noticed—"

Amelia breathed hard. "There are *women*," she acknowledged, giving the word the force of an opprobrious epithet, "who think of nothing but themselves, just like the men. But when I say 'the ladies' I'm not talking about creatures like that Mrs. Hadley!"

Mr. Bremble was a little surprised at the sudden introduction of this new theme. "Who is Mrs. Hadley?" he inquired.

Amelia bitterly mimicked his tone. "'Mrs. Hadley,' as you call her—"

Mr. Bremble felt that this venom was misdirected. "Why, you just called her that yourself, Amelia."

"Well, what if I did?" Amelia snorted. "I called her Mrs. Hadley by courtesy only. She's supposed to be a widow. Whether she is or not I leave to her conscience. But nobody else knows one thing about her, Henry. Not one single thing!"

Mr. Bremble was puzzled. "Well, but why should anybody know anything about her, Amelia?"

"Listen." Amelia leaned toward him. "Mrs. Cable and I went there to call, the very week after she moved into the old Paterson place—" Mr. Bremble caught his breath—"and asked her, as nicely as possible, if she wouldn't like to join a few of our working groups. We explained all about conditions and why such work is needed and how much more we can accomplish if we all work together in organizations, and all that. And all we got out of her was that she'd always been a little doubtful about the good actually accomplished by organizations, and that it seemed to her the ladies spent more time arguing among themselves than doing anything, and when they did do anything they were pretty patronizing about it. Patronizing!" Amelia paused for breath.

"Let me get this straight," Henry Bremble said patiently. "You said you 'explained all about conditions and why such work is needed.' I wish you'd explain it to me, too, Amelia. What conditions? What kind of work? I've sometimes felt, myself, that you and your mother and the other ladies are a little vague about it, except that it's supposed to be for democracy and—"

"Well, what more do you want?" Amelia cried out. "Isn't democracy good enough for you? Look here, Henry Bremble, if you think you're going to take sides with that woman against your own wife—"

Mr. Bremble made a hopeless gesture. "Now, now, Amelia, I'm not taking sides with anybody. Maybe you're right and maybe Mrs. Hadley is wrong. I don't know. I just wanted—"

"You just wanted to try to make me ridiculous, the very way she did that afternoon, asking silly questions and trying

to pin me down!" Amelia began to cry. "If that's the best you can do, Henry Bremble, I think it's about time you did go and see a psychiatrist! I only hope Dr. Willoughby will know what to make of you, for I certainly don't and neither does Mother. If Mother's said to me once she's said it a thousand times, 'I don't know what to make of that husband of yours, Amelia.' " She checked herself abruptly, drying her eyes. "I've made an appointment for you Tuesday afternoon with Dr. Willoughby, and if you know what's good for you, Henry Bremble, you'll be there. And no hanging back when he asks you questions, either. You co-operate with him."

Mr. Bremble, whose intention was not only to co-operate with Dr. Willoughby but to give him the last full measure of co-operation, shaken, pressed down, and running over, assented. But beyond the assent he could not consider Dr. Willoughby now. His whole mind was filled with a new and promising project. It was true he had thought before now of Miss Iris's house as a possible shelter for Susy in her time of storm, but his old-fashioned reticence had made it unthinkable to speak of Susy's problem to a woman he supposed to be unmarried. If Miss Iris had been married, if she was a widow, he might be able to summon courage for the appeal.

He grew increasingly excited at the idea. He wanted, more than any words could express, to help Susy, if only for the sake of ridding himself of the albatross she had hung around his unwilling neck. In another way he wanted, more than he liked to realize, to have speech with Miss Iris. But even now there was something in him that hesitated. Having two perfect pictures of her in his mind, he faltered before the possibility of losing them.

He arranged his bits of evidence in order. She was gentle, she was delicate, she liked the maid Clarissa and called her "my dear." She had not minded when Clarissa spilled the peas. She had not even, as Amelia would have done, said "Tchk, tchk, tchk!" And she disliked Amelia's organizations and would have none of them.

All very hopeful, as far as it went. Mr. Bremble's heart beat faster at the idea of going in at the picket gate, of talking with her. He tried to frame his story in advance, in words that could not possibly offend her, and he discovered in himself an acrid feeling of offense that it was with such a story he must approach her. If he could have gone to her as a friend, and sat with her in the arbor under the grapes and wistaria, and talked with her of things that concerned them alone, or perhaps not talked at all—

Yes, that would have been another thing entirely. Nevertheless he saw that, disagreeable as the prospect was, the thing must be carried through, for he had not been able to arrive at any other solution. "If 'twere done, 'twere well 'twere done quickly," he quoted resolutely to himself, and that evening, under pretext of going for a walk, he set forth, quivering in heart and limb, to the ordeal.

The days were lengthening rapidly, and it was barely twilight when he arrived. He had thought he would have to knock and go into the house, but he saw the light blur of her dress in the summerhouse as he approached. Well, perhaps the half-light would soften things, somehow, and ease him. Perhaps he could tell his story better in the summerhouse.

He had set his hand to the picket gate before he saw that she was not alone. There was a man in the arbor with her, unnoticeable at first because of his dark garments.

Mr. Bremble hesitated, his hand still on the gate. Having keyed himself up to the interview, he felt completely at a loss to be thus checked. He had a panicky moment during which he doubted that he could ever rise to the effort again. But before he could turn away, the man, seeing him, rose and came toward him, calling him by name. "Mr. Bremble! I've been wanting to see you. Come in just a minute, won't you?" He came toward Mr. Bremble at a half-lope, his long legs spurning the blue grass of the garden. "I'm Walter Anderson. I don't know whether you remember me, but I'm pastor of the church your wife attends."

"Why, yes," Mr. Bremble replied, bewildered but courteous. "Of course, Mr. Anderson, I remember you. How are you?"

The young man disregarded this inquiry. "Come in just a minute, won't you, and meet Mrs. Hadley—if you haven't already?" He urged Mr. Bremble through the gate and toward the summerhouse. "I've been wanting to tell you, Mr. Bremble, how sorry I am about what happened at your house the other day. I'm afraid I rather upset Mrs. Bremble, and I wanted you to know I didn't mean to."

He turned to Iris Hadley, who was now standing at the summerhouse door. "Iris, this is Mr. Bremble, a neighbor. I thought you'd like to meet him, and he was passing by—"

"Why, of course," said Mrs. Hadley. She smiled at the harassed Mr. Bremble, offering him her hand. "Come in, Mr. Bremble, and have a cool drink. We're having lemonade, out of deference to Walter's cloth. Walter, will you call Clarissa—oh, no, you needn't; here's a glass."

She poured the lemonade as Mr. Bremble sat down on the edge of a bench, smiling at him again as she gave it to

him. Walter Anderson seated himself astride the table and took a long draught from his own glass, setting it down to speak to Mrs. Hadley. "I was just apologizing to Mr. Bremble for setting Mrs. Bremble by the—for getting Mrs. Bremble a bit upset." He grinned, with immense good humor, at Mr. Bremble. "I certainly stirred me up a hornet's nest when I closed that mission."

"I dare say you did," said Mr. Bremble, seeing that they were waiting for him to speak. "But I think you did right, Mr. Anderson." He paused a moment, searching for words. "Don't worry about Amelia's getting upset, Mr. Anderson. She's a little excitable now and then."

They murmured placatively in response and then fell silent. The silence, it seemed to Mr. Bremble, was an extraordinary one. There was nothing in the least uncomfortable about it. He wondered if they knew he had meant to come in; he thought they did. An overwhelming relief took him. He ceased to feel that the presence of a third person would hinder him; indeed, ever since he had read Mr. Anderson's psalm he had felt closely connected with this young man, and surely a minister would know how to take his story.

He summoned all the resolution at his command and turned to his hostess. "The fact is, Mrs. Hadley," he admitted, clearing his throat, "I was coming to see you anyway. I thought you might be able to give me some advice."

"Yes, Mr. Bremble?" Her tone and manner encouraged him.

"It's about a girl in the office where I work." Mr. Bremble shifted a little uneasily. If he could just get over the beginning . . . "You see," he went on painstakingly, "I'm an accountant in a plumbing concern—"

"I see," said Mrs. Hadley gently, as he paused. "And you were coming to see me about a girl in your office?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bremble, setting his glass down. "The—the lemonade is delicious, Mrs. Hadley. Well, the fact is this girl—this girl's in trouble."

They looked at him attentively, saying nothing. Neither of them seemed at all surprised or shocked, and Mr. Bremble took courage. "Susy Jennings, her name is," he went on. "She came into my office not long ago and told me—" He hesitated again, blinked, and then, with a schoolboy's rush, broke into his story.

They heard him through without interrupting. When he seemed to have no more to say they looked at each other, and Mrs. Hadley nodded. "Why, yes, Mr. Bremble," she said, "she can come here. Clarissa and I have plenty of room to spare, and we'll never eat half the vegetables out of the garden." She paused a moment, considering. "This would be a nice place for a baby, too."

Mr. Bremble felt a flood of relief pour over him. "That's what I thought," he managed to say at last. "I know it's asking a good deal of you, Mrs. Hadley, but—"

"Why, no, it's not," said Iris Hadley reasonably. "Why should it be? I have all this room, and I have Clarissa—Clarissa's a glutton for work; she spoils me abominably. If she has somebody else to do for, maybe I'll save my soul yet; do you think so, Walter?" She laughed. "Walter's been very nice, but I always feel he regards me as a sloth and a sybarite. Don't you, Walter?"

"Not at all," the young minister said absent-mindedly.

"Well, as a sinner, anyhow. I hardly ever go to church," she explained to Mr. Bremble. "How can I get in touch with

Susy, Mr. Bremble? Shall I write to her, or go to see her? Which do you think would be easier for her?"

Mr. Bremble pondered. "I—I hardly know, Mrs. Hadley. I never thought of it. I could tell her about it tomorrow at the office."

"Will you do that, then? And if she wants to come and see me, that's all right, and if she doesn't I'll go and see her. Or if she wants to pack up and come right out, Clarissa can have her room ready for her in no time."

Mr. Bremble drew a long breath. "I can't tell you how much I thank you, Mrs. Hadley," he said devoutly.

Another silence fell. Mr. Bremble was so eased of his long-carried burden that he felt almost sleepy. It was he, at last, who broke the silence, telling them of the quarrel he had interrupted between Susy and Willy Wilson. "I got the impression that Willy was in love with Susy himself," he added tentatively. "Willy certainly was in a fury about it."

Walter Anderson set down his glass. "He feeling any better yet?"

Mr. Bremble shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Willy's a pretty peppery young fellow." He hesitated. "I've been a little worried for fear he might do something he oughtn't to do. You take a boy like that when he thinks he's being abused—"

Walter Anderson took a pencil from his pocket. "What did you say his name was?"

"Willy Wilson."

"Willy Wilson." Mr. Anderson wrote it down. "Do you know where he lives?"

"I could find out," said Mr. Bremble.

"I wish you would. I'll look him up. Yes, Iris?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Hadley, pouring lemonade.

Mr. Bremble's worried face brightened. "I suppose you do a great deal of that sort of thing, Mr. Anderson?"

"Here and there, where I can." Anderson turned to Mrs. Hadley. "I think we've got young Allison about straightened out, Iris."

"That's good," Mrs. Hadley said serenely. "More lemonade?"

"Thanks."

Mr. Bremble, who for some time had been feeling something pushing at his attention, now caught hold of it. "There's another young boy I heard of," he ventured, "a boy named Harold Perlberg. He's playing truant from school—cutting classes, they call it—to go to the public library and read Shakespeare." Mr. Bremble chuckled. "I never heard of a boy doing that before, did you?"

"I certainly never did," replied Mrs. Hadley. "What an extraordinary thing!"

Mr. Anderson had his notebook out again. "Harold Perlberg? Know where he lives?"

Mr. Bremble shook his head. "He goes to Austin High School, though. One of his teachers is a friend of my wife's. She says the boy's mother told her he'd been having trouble at home with his father."

Mr. Anderson nodded, with an ironic glance at Mrs. Hadley. "I dare say; it's the same old story," he said. "Well, I'll look them both up, Mr. Bremble, and thanks for telling me. Any more?"

Mrs. Hadley laughed. "Take it easy, Walter," she advised. "You can't save the whole world, you know—not until next week, at least."

Mr. Anderson laughed too. "Thanks, Iris—she's awfully

good for me," he explained to Mr. Bremble. "Keeps me from getting too big an idea of myself. Well, I've got to go. Bless you, Iris; you're a very nice woman, my dear."

"I must go too," Mr. Bremble said, rising. "I certainly thank you from the bottom of my heart, Mrs. Hadley, for your kindness about Susy," he said again as she offered him her hand.

"But didn't I tell you you're an instrument of Providence in the saving of my soul?" she smiled as he took it. "It's I who should be saying thanks to you. Must you really go, both of you? Well, good night—and pleasant dreams."

* 9 *

PLEASANT dreams. Mr. Bremble, laying his head on his pillow beside the already slumbering Amelia, felt that no sleeping dream could be half so pleasant as the waking one that held him in its thrall. How little she had said, yet how perfect it all had been! He would not have changed a syllable of it. For just a moment one horror did attack him. He had not mentioned Horace Widdinger, and he wondered if Mrs. Hadley could possibly have thought—

He turned in his sudden panic to God, Who was there as always. God shook His head. "Shame on you, Henry!" he said. "I'm surprised at you. She's not that kind of a girl."

It was with a greatly lightened heart, therefore, that Mr. Bremble set forth on Tuesday afternoon for his first interview with the psychiatrist. He was introduced by the office nurse to a slight, dark, remote-looking man with a pointed black beard and eyeglasses on a black ribbon.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Bremble," said Dr. Willoughby, shaking hands. "If you'll just go into the inner office." He escorted Mr. Bremble in, himself pausing at the doorway. "Lie down on the couch," he suggested, "and make yourself quite comfortable, Mr. Bremble. I'll be with you in just a moment." He disappeared.

Mr. Bremble lay down on the couch and closed his eyes. In his new elation the whole situation amused him. The couch was far more comfortable, he was sure, than the classic forms of confessional—another great advance in modern science, and highly commendable too. He felt about in his pockets for some cursory notes he had made, but decided that he would not need them. He had just removed his hand from his pocket when the doctor returned.

"Now, Mr. Bremble," Dr. Willoughby's voice, appropriately soft and soothing, broke through the gentle silence. "I'd like to have you relax completely. Relax all your muscles, close your eyes—that's right. Now, just as soon as you feel like it—there's no hurry—start talking."

"What about?" asked Mr. Bremble interestedly.

"What about? Oh, about anything you like. Mrs. Bremble has given me the history of the case—" Mr. Bremble smiled faintly to himself—"so I think we needn't go into that now. Your childhood, perhaps, Mr. Bremble. We'll get to that eventually in any case, so it might be just as well to begin with it, don't you think so? When you were a child—"

Mr. Bremble shook his head doubtfully, keeping his eyes conscientiously closed. "I doubt if you'd get so very much out of that to help my present situation," he objected. "You see, when I was a child, Dr. Willoughby, I was a little girl."

"Ah?" Dr. Willoughby leaned forward slightly, as Mr. Bremble could see from the shadow he cast against the window curtain. "That's interesting. That's very interesting indeed. Go on, Mr. Bremble."

"A very remarkable little girl," Mr. Bremble continued willingly enough. "A little girl of angelic beauty, though perhaps a trifle precocious. When I was two years old I fell in love with my great-aunt Emma."

"Just a minute, Mr. Bremble." The psychiatrist cleared his throat. "We're going a little too fast—getting just a bit ahead of ourselves. Before we go into the emotional complications, let's just get all our facts straight, shan't we? Now about your being a little girl, for instance. I think we'd better get that cleared up first. What was the attitude of your parents in the matter?"

"Just about what you would expect," said Mr. Bremble. "They never had much sense, either of them."

"Ah?" said the specialist, making notes. "Now, just cast your mind back, Mr. Bremble, and see if you can't remember a little more about their feeling in the matter. I should say that in all probability they imagined you to be a little boy. Now didn't they?"

"Of course they did," said Mr. Bremble irritably. "So did everybody else, including the Presbyterian minister who baptized me. God, how I hated that man."

"We'll come back to him presently," Dr. Willoughby reassured him, making notes. "Now, Mr. Bremble, how do you account for this strange mistake on the part of all your adult acquaintances, including your own parents? Isn't it just possible that they were right, after all, and that the mistake was your own?"

Mr. Bremble wearily entreated him not to be silly.

"Very well, Mr. Bremble," the physician responded soothingly. "We'll just leave them alone for the present and go back to yourself, if you will. First let me ask you this: What made you so sure, yourself, that you were a girl? How did you know, after all, that you weren't a boy, Mr. Bremble?"

Mr. Bremble raised himself on his elbow, turned round, and looked at his questioner severely. "Really, Dr. Willoughby!" he said.

The specialist coughed, cleared his throat, and motioned him back to the pillow with a magnetic hand. "Just rest while you talk, if you please, Mr. Bremble; it makes it much easier for—"

Mr. Bremble lay down again. "Very well," he said with a touch of asperity. "Though after that last question of yours I tell you frankly I think I'd be justified in asking to see your diploma."

Dr. Willoughby ignored this. "You were saying, Mr. Bremble, about your great-aunt Emma—"

"I loved her," Mr. Bremble said simply. "I loved her with a passion that threatened to unseat my reason. She was the only woman I ever really loved. She had six toes on her left foot, I remember; that may have had something to do with it. But, be that as it may, I loved her—desperately and hopelessly." He paused. "That's another reason I know I was a girl and couldn't have been intended to grow up into a man."

"Ah?" Dr. Willoughby leaned forward again. "Just how do you make that connection, Mr. Bremble?"

"I should have thought a child would see it," said Mr. Bremble. "But, if you insist, I will explain. It was evident at the time, and it was demonstrated conclusively over a period of years thereafter, that no man could possibly have loved my great-aunt Emma and lived to tell the tale. Not," he added reasonably after a moment, "that any man ever tried it."

"Except you?" Dr. Willoughby injected tentatively.

Mr. Bremble was not to be caught. "I wasn't a man, I tell you," he pointed out firmly. "I was a little girl. But I loved her: Ah, the ecstasy of it, Dr. Willoughby! The wild, pagan delight of it! I had a little bow and arrow at the time, and though I live to be a thousand years old I can never forget

the rapture that shook my whole tiny body when I shot her —the *ping* of the arrow as it struck home, the way she leaped and yelped and turned upon me—”

“And then what happened?” Dr. Willoughby prompted him.

Mr. Bremble raised a prohibitive hand. “Please, Dr. Willoughby,” he objected plaintively, “there are some things too intimate, too sacred for discussion. Let us not speak further of the matter, if you please.”

Dr. Willoughby hesitated. “Well, perhaps we have gone far enough for today, if you feel that way, Mr. Bremble,” he admitted, rising. “But this last point you have raised is highly significant. It gives me hope that we are on the right track in discovering your difficulty. The ecstasy of the occasional child under chastisement is not entirely unfamiliar to the members of my profession.”

Mr. Bremble, who knew it wasn’t—for he had spent the whole of his Saturday afternoon at the scientific library, conning the *Psychiatrist’s Guide and Archives*, with particular attention to Volume xxxvii, page 1046, case report 20—nodded briskly and agreed to return on the following Tuesday. He shook hands cordially with Dr. Willoughby and made his way triumphantly downstairs.

The afternoon, he felt, had been highly rewarding. He didn’t know when he had had so good a time. It had left him in a mood of heady adventure, so that he was ready to contemplate anything that might offer itself. As he got into the convertible and sped happily home to Amelia, he considered successively the merits of driving the machine up the stairs of the plumbing concern and into the office, thereby giving the rest of the staff something to think about, at least; of halting in the middle of the street and loudly im-

ploring all and sundry to come and be saved from damnation; of running down a traffic policeman and, with a foot planted squarely on his stomach, writing out a ticket demanding his appearance in court at a specified time, subject to heavy penalty if disregarded.

None of these projects, however, was really adequate to his mood. For Mr. Bremble, having discovered in himself unexpected powers as a raconteur, and congratulating himself on a certain trenchant fluency of speech he had never before attained, was drunk. He was so much drunker, in fact, than any man-made liquor could have left him, that if he had yielded to his momentary impulse to stop at the first bar he passed and have a couple, he would probably have left the establishment sobered from head to heels, a tragic and a disappointed man.

Some deep-laid instinct must have warned him of this, for he did not yield to the impulse. He went straight home, feeling like a champagne bubble in a crowd of foaming companions. He remembered as he set his key in the lock that this was the day of Amelia's bridge party, and that the latest lap of the historic tournament was doubtless still in full swing.

A babble of female voices, as the door opened, confirmed this impression. Mr. Bremble rose on his tiptoes as he entered, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Stealthily he crept up the stairs; lurking he peered about him to make sure that no member of the altruistic revel downstairs had sneaked off to the upper floor to "do" her face afresh and to investigate the contents of Amelia's cupboards.

There seemed to be nobody in sight or in hearing. Mr. Bremble drew a long sigh of relief and went into the room he shared with Amelia, meaning to lie down and lie low

until the silence beneath him assured him that he might emerge to his dinner.

But it was not to be. The bed was piled high with women's coats—coats of every color and description, heaped upon one another in a gay jumble of wool and silk and fur and rayon and tweed and camel's hair, and lighted here and there, spectacularly, with buttons.

Buttons. Into Mr. Bremble's already excited eyes there stole a lustful gleam. What buttons they were, of ivory and ebony and gold! What miracles of twisting and design! What flash of jewels half-hidden under fur! How seldom, into the life of the average humble collector, do these supernal moments come!

It could not be that the ladies appreciated the buttons. They never appreciated anything that was worth having. No, they possessed this Aladdin's cave of treasure merely by virtue of being female; and what, Mr. Bremble asked himself, could be sillier than that? A one-sided world it was, and a one-sided world it always had been; but surely it was the sheerest ineptitude if any man, confronted with an opportunity like this, should turn, like a poltroon, away.

Mr. Bremble caught his breath and held it. For a full minute thus he stood in contemplation. Then suddenly, stealthily, as if of its own accord, his hand stole forth to the drawer of the dressing table. There, he knew, Amelia kept a pair of efficient scissors. One quick slash, another and another and yet another, and—

He moved upon the bed, scissors in hand.

* 10 *

BUT what on earth possessed you to *do* such a thing, Henry?" Amelia wailed for the hundredth time, wiping her streaming eyes with one of the embroidered napkins. "You know how I slaved over this party. You know what it meant to me. How can I ever hold up my head in the League again? I'll never be president again, that's one thing certain."

She shuddered, gasped, flung down the wet napkin on a bridge table and took up another. "And I don't know what you mean by a button collection. You never told me you had a button collection. I never saw a sign of a button collection anywhere about the house, and if you keep it at the office——"

Mrs. Corey, an interested listener, cackled. "He don't keep it at the office," she interjected, "does he, Queenie?"

Queenie sniffed. Amelia burst into tears again, wailing afresh. "If I could see even a glimmer of sense in the whole miserable business!" she moaned. "But I just can't believe you'd do such a thing to me, Henry!"

Mrs. Corey, who had information to offer, continued as though Amelia had not interrupted her. "No, sir, he don't keep his button collection at no office. If Amelia knew what was what, she'd look in her own things once in a while,

wouldn't she, Queenie? Right upstairs in her own room, where she keeps all her receipts and letters." She kissed Queenie noisily and looked off into the distance, smirking. "Oh, my, yes! We know men's tricks, don't we, Queenie? They can't fool us. No, siree."

Mr. Bremble, from the abyss of his wretchedness, looked at his mother-in-law with a reddening eye. He felt no surprise that she had rummaged through his bedroom, probably months before, saving up what she had discovered until an appropriate moment for its use, this being exactly what he would have expected of her. But the realization that her prying old fingers, probably smeared with chocolate, had doubtless seized upon Miss Iris in her little white separate box, and that her evil old eyes had gloated thereon, by some devilish thaumaturgy divining its whole history and significance—this was another matter, this was sacrilege, and Henry Bremble's heart rocked yearningly toward murder.

As usual, his murderous impulse died a-borning. In the first place, he knew and had known ever since the day God winked at him that he was not constructed for high and desperate emprise; and in the second, he was too weak, at the moment, even to rise from his chair. In reconnoitering the upstairs rooms before he made his raid upon the buttons he had forgotten the bathroom, and one of the ladies, emerging therefrom, had caught sight of him as he severed the last one and had screamed.

What followed the scream still beat at his senses like hammers—the shrieks, the squeals, the tattoo of hurrying footsteps, the incredulity, the horror, the furious looks, the hysterical laughter, the snatching up of coats, the rattle of buttons as the frenzied women swooped to salvage their own, the secret victorious looks at Mrs. Corey and Amelia,

Amelia's white, stunned face, the excited yaps of Queenie—all remained, blending unbearably into a crescendo of hammer-strokes beating him down to nothing, and with every pound Amelia's tortured and torturing question, "Why—why—*why?*"

He had tried to tell her why at last, for he had not been able to bear the beating long. But he found he could not actually tell her why, because he didn't know. All he could tell her was that he had a collection of buttons; and as he made this feeble confession, knowing well how pungently he would later regret it, he knew also that Amelia would rightly think it one of those not infrequent explanations that explain nothing whatever.

"Harridan," thought Mr. Bremble bitterly, looking at Mrs. Corey, for he found that he could not look at the suffering Amelia. "Hair, raid, darn, hard, rind, drain, rain, hind, hand—"

The gloom that settled over the Bremble household at that moment spread through the rooms and into the uttermost corners, covering everything. The days passed somehow, with Amelia alternately preserving an acrid silence and bursting forth irrepressibly into renewed lamentations and demands for satisfaction.

Mr. Bremble could give her no satisfaction. He was sorry for her, for he could see that her suffering was real; and, although he had no doubt that her concern for her husband's sanity (which she repeatedly told him she doubted) was second to her anguish at the thought of losing both presidency and prestige in the League for Democracy and the other organizations to which she was devoted, he knew that she was to some extent concerned for him.

She had gone at once to Dr. Willoughby with the story, for on his next visit to the office Dr. Willoughby asked him, tactfully, about his hobbies.

"Hobbies?" repeated Mr. Bremble, playing for time.

"Exactly," said Dr. Willoughby, in his velvety voice. "Some little diversion, say, such as stamp collecting, for instance. Do you collect stamps by any chance, Mr. Bremble?"

Mr. Bremble shook his head. "No."

"Ah," said Dr. Willoughby. "I thought perhaps you might. Many prominent men, as you doubtless know, have done so. We find, Mr. Bremble, in my profession, that a hobby of some kind is an excellent thing for most persons, adding interest to life and—ah, interest. Variety, that is to say. I'm sure you have a hobby of some kind, Mr. Bremble. Now haven't you?"

Mr. Bremble appeared to consider the question. "I don't know whether you'd call it a hobby or not," he said after a moment, "but there's something I like to do."

"I was sure of it," said the specialist, pleased and sympathetic. "And what is it you like to do, Mr. Bremble? Do you mind telling me?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Bremble cordially. "I like to feel mosquito bites."

There was a silence of some moments. At last Dr. Willoughby cleared his throat. "Ah—to feel mosquito bites, Mr. Bremble? Now I confess that puzzles me a little. I wonder if you'd tell me just how you mean that." He laughed carefully. "You know, Mr. Bremble, I don't believe I ever knew anyone before who liked to be bitten by mosquitoes."

"I don't care so much about being bitten," Mr. Bremble explained with painstaking exactness. "But if they don't

bite you how are you going to feel the bites? It stands to reason."

There was another silence. "Just let me get clear on this, Mr. Bremble," Dr. Willoughby said after a time. "You say you don't care about being bitten by mosquitoes, and yet you like to feel the bites. Now isn't there a contradiction there, Mr. Bremble?"

"I don't see any contradiction at all," said Mr. Bremble. "They come and bite me and go on about their business, and then I feel the bites as long as they last. That's all there is to it."

Dr. Willoughby, after several minutes of cogitation, advanced a theory. "I believe I'm beginning to understand, Mr. Bremble. You mean you like to feel the—the swellings with your fingers. You feel these—these little swellings with your fingers—"

"Naturally I feel them with my fingers," Mr. Bremble interrupted testily. "What did you suppose I felt them with? And what do you mean by little swellings? I have no little swellings. I'm not made that way. I can safely say I've never had a mosquito bite in my life that was smaller than a silver quarter, and most of them are any amount bigger. You take a good healthy bite on the calf of the leg—" Mr. Bremble suddenly raised himself on his elbow and looked at Dr. Willoughby. "Is this subject entirely unfamiliar to you, Dr. Willoughby?"

Dr. Willoughby looked startled. "Why—why, I'm afraid it is," he confessed suavely. "Just relax, Mr. Bremble, please. Yes, I must admit that I've never, as you might say, looked into—"

Mr. Bremble relaxed obediently. "Well, you ought to," he said somewhat severely. "You'd find it well worth your

while. Just let me point out to you, Dr. Willoughby, that there's all the difference in the world between a mosquito bite on the calf of the leg and a mosquito bite on the lower lip. Even if it's the same mosquito that does the biting."

"Indeed?" said Dr. Willoughby, making notes.

"Dr. Willoughby," said Mr. Bremble, warming to his work, "just let me ask you this: Were you ever bitten by four or five dozen mosquitoes in as many places all at the same time?"

"No," said Dr. Willoughby, entirely clear on this point.

Mr. Bremble nodded, his eyes closed. "I thought you probably hadn't been. Well, I have, and I speak as an expert when I say that it can be the most memorable experience of a man's entire career. Listen, Dr. Willoughby." He propped himself again on his elbow, disregarding the other's quieting gesture. "One July morning, two or three years ago—it was early, not yet seven o'clock, as I remember—I went out into the orchard to eat some cherries. The cherry trees were all quite young and small and stood together in a sort of thicket. It had rained the night before. I walked into the thicket and reached for the cherries—I was wearing thin pajamas at the time—and I do not exaggerate when I say that no fewer than sixty mosquitoes had bitten me, in as many different places, before I had so much as detached a single cherry from the tree."

Dr. Willoughby winced. "I don't believe I should have enjoyed that," he said.

Mr. Bremble lay down again. "Of course you wouldn't have enjoyed it. That's not the point. Nobody could have enjoyed it. I ran all the way from the orchard to the house, falling down three times before I got there, in the acutest

possible physical agony from head to foot. It was all I could do to keep from screaming under the torture of it."

"That I can imagine," said Dr. Willoughby. "But I still don't see where the pleasure comes in."

Mr. Bremble opened his eyes and gave his mentor a censorious look. "It's your idea, is it, Dr. Willoughby, that we are put into this world solely for the purpose of obtaining pleasure?"

Dr. Willoughby said nothing.

"I should have thought that a man of your type," Mr. Bremble continued, "would see at once the infinite possibilities for research and discovery in such a situation. There are as many nuances in mosquito bites, Dr. Willoughby, as there are in sunsets or any other natural manifestation. Between the lush, luxurious opulence of a bite on the inner part of the forearm and the hard, parsimonious sharpness of a bite on one of the tendons at the back of the neck there is as wide a difference as there is between heaven and hell. And how, if you never have such an experience as mine, are you going to discover what a bite on the belly or —well, in other places—feels like? You can't. You never will. Your clothes protect you. Dr. Willoughby, that's one of the basic troubles in the world today—people shrinking from the fullness of experience, people content to savor life only on its fringes, so to speak, and never probing deeper into the mysterious reaches of thought and sensation that lie beyond. But I should have thought a man in your profession—"

Mr. Bremble said no more, leaving Dr. Willoughby to be scorched by his meaningful silence. Whether the scientist was so scorched he had no way of knowing, for Dr. Wil-

loughby sat as usual behind him. But he felt that he had shot his bolt for the day, at least, and that, since his time in the office must be nearly up, he had left Dr. Willoughby but a meager hope of buttons.

In this opinion he was soon confirmed. "I'm afraid, Mr. Bremble," said the physician, consulting his watch, "that our time is up for today. All this has been most interesting, very interesting indeed." He glanced with some awe at the notes he had made in his little black book. "Next time I'd like, if you will, to go into your other hobbies, for I'm sure you have others, Mr. Bremble."

Mr. Bremble rose, a little precipitately, and reached for his hat. "Dr. Willoughby," he said from the safe vantage point of the office threshold, "I am sure you have no intention of being offensive, but as a specialist you ought to know that no man can fritter away his time and attention on half a dozen projects and hope to accomplish anything with the one he is chiefly engaged in. Are you a jack of all trades, Dr. Willoughby? No? I thought not. Then kindly allow me to inform you that neither am I. Good afternoon, Dr. Willoughby."

As he rolled home, exhausted but peaceful, in the convertible that day, Mr. Bremble's thoughts were given a further slight reprieve from Amelia and her continuing woe by the pleasant discovery that God had got into the car and was riding with him. "You outdid yourself that time, Henry," God said approvingly. "That'll teach him a thing or two. . . . How in tunket did you happen to cut those buttons off the women's coats, Henry?"

Mr. Bremble hung his head. "I don't know," he confessed. "It seemed a very good idea at the time."

God seemed interested, even sympathetic. "Well, I know

how it is, of course, when you feel that way. But maybe you'd be better off to stop and think awhile next time, Henry. One of the lads wrote a book about that some time back—Solomon, his name was. He said something like 'There is a way which seemeth good to a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death!'

Mr. Bremble nodded. "I've heard of him. He was the wisest man on earth, wasn't he?"

God nodded dejectedly. "I suppose he was. He asked Me for wisdom, so I gave it to him, and he worked up quite a reputation. But somehow—" God sighed, for no reason that Mr. Bremble could see—"somehow I never did like that boy so much after that."

* 11 *

HAVING delivered Susy Jennings into the haven of the Hold Paterson place and received, with much prickling discomfort, her exuberant expressions of gratitude, Mr. Bremble, having no further excuse to see Miss Iris, had fallen back into his dream of her. From the importunities of Amelia, from the probings of Dr. Willoughby, from the searing pleasantries of Mr. Widdinger, and from the sniffings of Mrs. Corey and the intolerable Queenie, he fled to his dream of Miss Iris like a man plunging toward a mirage. It was not there, it could not be there in truth; had not he, Henry Bremble, lived long enough in a desert to know a mirage when he saw one? But it did no harm if the parched throat and the burning skin were allowed now and then to drench themselves in the thought of blue water and sooth-ing winds.

He thought of her, accordingly, and was eased. But he did not see her again until, as before, an external circumstance brought their meeting about. And this time the external circumstance was Myrna.

Myrna was the only child Mr. Bremble actually knew. On one of his walks he had passed her home, an untidy cottage

just off the modest but comfortable neighborhood in which he and Amelia lived. She was playing jackstones on the sidewalk, and he noticed that her knuckles were scraped and grimed from the concrete.

When she saw him coming, she scrambled to her feet to let him pass. As she did so she gave him an oddly searching look. Mr. Bremble looked mildly back. Their gazes met and held in a long, candid moment of mutual appraisal; then suddenly the child pushed a bang of ginger hair from her forehead and smiled. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," said Mr. Bremble.

The child put her jacks and her ball into the pocket of the shabby red sweater she wore and fell into step with him, sliding her rough little hand into his. She did not say another word, nor did he. She walked with him two blocks in one direction and three in another, and when they had returned in this silent communion to the sidewalk of her home, she took out her jacks, still without a word, and squatted down again to play with them.

Mr. Bremble was both pleased and flattered; and, when he had met her a few times more, he continued to be flattered, though no longer altogether pleased. There was something about the child that disquieted him. On their second meeting, after a long and somewhat disconcerting stare of recognition and deliberation, as though she were considering whether it was worth while to continue the acquaintance, she abruptly informed him that her name was Myrna Miller and that she was ten years old.

"I'm named after Myrna Loy," she added, concealing nothing. "I'd sooner look like Lana Turner, though. Boy, is she R. B.!"

"R. B.?" asked Mr. Bremble, puzzled.

"That means 'really built,'" explained Myrna. "She's a sweater girl."

She looked at Mr. Bremble anxiously. "You know what's a sweater girl?"

"No," said Mr. Bremble, "I don't believe I do."

"Oh," said Myrna, and spoke no more that evening.

It was at this point that Mr. Bremble began to be disturbed; for, although he had been entirely honest when he said he did not know what a sweater girl was, he could not feel that Myrna's conversation was altogether appropriate to her age, and the next time he passed her house he looked at it somewhat closely, wondering what sort of parents the child might have. But he saw nothing of parents of any kind. Myrna, as usual, was alone.

This time she sat cross-legged on the sidewalk, reading a photoplay magazine. "George brought me this," she said, on seeing Mr. Bremble, and held up the magazine.

"George?"

"One of Mother's boy friends," Myrna explained. "He brings me all kinds of magazines and comic books. Nearly every time he comes."

Mr. Bremble slowly took this in. "Is your mother a widow?" he asked diffidently, after a time.

"What?"

Mr. Bremble blushed. "Has your father—ah—gone to heaven?"

Myrna laughed merrily. "Heck, no. My father travels. Is he a dope!" She paused, her candid eyes under the ginger bang surveying her friend's troubled face. "He don't like my mother to be so popular. My mother's awful popular. I like to read," she added suddenly.

"Do you?"

Myrna nodded. "I'd sooner read than anything. I've read lots of books—*Ex-Wife* and *Heart's Torture* and *I Confess It* and I don't know how many. I guess I'm a bookworm is what you'd call me." She laughed again, airily but a little self-consciously.

Mr. Bremble's discomfort was increasing. "Where—where's your mother now?" he asked at length.

"Out with George, I guess. Or Sandy, or some of 'em." Myrna's recurrent taciturnity came upon her. She stretched her scrawny legs out in front of her and turned a page of the magazine.

At this point in the proceedings Mr. Bremble had always tactfully withdrawn, but he could not quite do so this time; he lingered, hesitating. "She'll be back pretty soon, I guess," he ventured, "when it's time for you to go to bed, won't she?"

"Maybe," Myrna replied absent-mindedly. "Not likely, though." And she pushed her hair behind her ears and gave herself up to her reading.

Mr. Bremble, thus dismissed, went home. But the vision of Myrna alone in the dingy cottage—had she had any supper, he wondered?—would not leave him. And, although he knew nothing about what children read, he could not help feeling that the titles of the books she had recited were the reverse of reassuring; so the next day, during his lunch hour, he went into a bookshop.

"You—you have books for children?" he asked shyly, a little daunted by the suave young saleswoman's towering pompadour.

"Certainly. Boys or girls?"

"Why—ah—girls," said Mr. Bremble, as though he were not quite sure.

"And the age level?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Bremble.

The young lady with the pompadour looked bored. "How old is the child for whom you wished the books?" she elucidated.

"Oh," said Mr. Bremble. "Why, she's about ten, I think. Yes, ten."

The saleswoman nodded. "Will you come this way, please?"

Mr. Bremble followed her meekly to a corner of the shop, where she waved him to a section variously labeled "Preschool," "6 to 8," "8 to 10," "Junior," and "Adolescent." "Perhaps you would like to browse awhile?" the girl suggested blandly.

"Browse?" Mr. Bremble knitted his eyebrows. "Oh. Oh—ah, yes." And he began pottering among the books, greatly relieved when the elegant presence had left him. But his researches were, on the whole, unsatisfactory; he could not tell exactly why, having only an impression that the books in the "8 to 10" section and the "Junior" section, although charming to look at and most beautifully illustrated, were lacking, somehow, in something extremely important.

He found not one to his liking, and, having but a limited amount of time to spend, left the shop without making a purchase. A man was always at a disadvantage, he supposed, in deciding what would please a little girl. "Miss Iris would know," he thought as he turned back to the office.

The slight tremor of his nerves as he thought of seeing Miss Iris did not decrease his uneasiness; indeed, it empha-

sized it. "She'll think I'm a nuisance," he thought, and winced; but he knew that he must see her again.

So when he took his walk that evening he did not go past Myrna's. Instead, he took the course that would lead him past the Paterson place. He told himself, insistently and repeatedly, that he would not go in, would not dream of going in; he would just walk by, and if he happened to see her in the garden—

But it was Susy Jennings he saw first. Susy was leaning on the fence, idly playing with a long spear of grass. She was alone, and smiled with social cordiality at his approach.

"Why, hello, Mr. Bremble!" she greeted him. "How's every little thing at the office these days?"

Mr. Bremble, filled with the annoyance this girl never failed to bring forth in him, answered that the office was much about as usual. "How are you getting along, Susy?" he added politely.

"Oh, fine. I like it here." She paused. "She's kind of funny, Mrs. Hadley is, but she's awfully good to me."

"How do you mean, funny?" asked Mr. Bremble, piqued.

"Oh, I don't know—she's just different." Susy shrugged. She leaned across the fence, suddenly confidential. "Mr. Bremble, I guess you'll think this is a funny thing for me to say, but Clarissa—that's Mrs. Hadley's colored maid—she's been awfully good to me too." Susy laughed consciously, coloring a little. "I guess you think that sounds pretty funny, don't you, Mr. Bremble, me saying a coon's been good to me? But she has, anyhow." Susy looked at Mr. Bremble with an expression compounded of amusement and defiance. "But I know it must sound funny."

Mr. Bremble said nothing.

"You know, I kind of like her," Susy added with another

self-conscious giggle. "I feel sort of sorry for her, you know, being colored and all. I guess we all have our troubles, don't we, Mr. Bremble? I was just thinking when you came along, I was thinking, well, here I am in trouble and everything, but look for the silver lining; anyways my baby won't be a nigger baby. That's something to be thankful for, isn't it?"

Mr. Bremble, his gorge rising, took leave of her with what courtesy he could muster and walked on. At the far end of the Paterson grounds, he came upon Mrs. Hadley. She was cutting sweet peas; a great basket of them lay at her feet. She saw him and smiled. "Why, it's Mr. Bremble!"

She came toward the fence, drawing off her gardening gloves, and gave him her hand. "Isn't this a priceless evening?"

Mr. Bremble, healed, conceded the beauty of the evening. They talked desultorily for a few moments about the weather, the sweet peas, and the need of rain, and little by little Mr. Bremble got round to Myrna and her reading. He did not tell Mrs. Hadley about Myrna's "popular" mother and her assorted boy friends, merely saying that the child had given him the impression that she was fond of reading and had nothing suitable to read. "I went down to Latimer's this noon, and tried to find her something, but—"

Iris Hadley laughed irrepressibly. "Don't tell me what you found, Mr. Bremble," she said gaily. "Let me tell you. You found beautiful books with beautiful pictures and beautiful bindings, and then you made the fatal mistake of trying to read them. Didn't you?"

"Well," said Mr. Bremble doubtfully, "well, yes, I did."

"And one of them was all about railroads, and one was about how the farmer rotates his crops, and one told how Victor Vitamin and Minnie Mineral fell in

love and were married in a beautiful, healthful salad."

Mr. Bremble stared, incredulous. "How did you know?"

Mrs. Hadley laughed again. "You and I were the lucky ones, Mr. Bremble, weren't we? When we were children, a story was a story. I think maybe I can help you out on—what's her name? Myrna? I have a few of my old favorites still around. Between you and me, I still read them sometimes. But Myrna probably needs them more than I do. Won't you come in and let me find you a couple? Or would you rather just wait out here while I run and get them? I won't be a minute."

Mr. Bremble hesitated. For a moment the temptation to go inside the house was a strong one, but his old reluctance to have his picture spoiled held him back. "I'll just wait out here, if you don't mind, Mrs. Hadley," he said. "This certainly is kind of you."

But she was gone, and in less than five minutes she returned carrying two books. "I used to love these," she said as she gave them to him. "I hope Myrna will too. I tore out the flyleaves that had my name on them, so they'll be all hers."

Mr. Bremble accepted the books, stammering his thanks. He could just make out the titles in the gathering dusk. *Under the Lilacs* was one, and *The Green Fairy Book* was the other. "I was looking for a fairy story," he told her, "and I did find one with a picture of a fairy on the back. But the story was just about a little girl who had a birthday and got a new dress and a box of paints and some drawing paper—"

"And when her birthday came, she put on her new dress and took her drawing paper and paints and the Birthday Fairy came and helped her paint pictures?" Mrs. Hadley finished for him, smiling.

Mr. Bremble gaped at her. She laughed. "It's not clairvoyance; I've seen that one too," she confessed. "Poor infants, they certainly are dieted! No wonder they're all in love with Superman. Well, you try these on Myrna, Mr. Bremble, and if she's not past liking them I have more. Let me know, won't you?"

Mr. Bremble thanked her again and went home, oddly comforted. Yet with all his comfort there was discontent. He had seen her again; he had talked with her again; she had told him so much, and he had told her nothing. It was the feeling he always had. With every word she spoke she told him something about herself, something, to him, priceless beyond imagination; but all his own words were commonplace, of Susy Jennings and Willy Wilson and Myrna Miller, of weather and sweet peas and the need of rain.

What it was he longed to tell her he had no idea, but the longing was as intense as if he had known. He was entirely innocent of any realization that what he secretly yearned for was to play Othello to her Desdemona, and beguile her with tales of adventure he had never had, of lands where men's heads do grow beneath their shoulders. There were galleons mixed up in Mr. Bremble's desire, and palm trees black against crimson skies, and jaguars swift as light and beautiful as sunrise. But when he would have told her, what happened? Up from nowhere, and planted squarely between them, sprang the dingy shape of a Susy Jennings, a Willy Wilson, or a Myrna Miller, and he could only prate of their several difficulties—no earthly business of his, after all, he assured himself angrily—and mutter his bashful thanks and go on his way.

His bashful thanks. Yes, thanks; she never failed him. He was beginning to feel that she would not fail him no mat-

ter what impossible thing he asked of her. She seemed to him, in her gay graciousness, the embodiment in sweet flesh of that idea which had all his life given him comfort—the idea of a woman with her hand stretched out, and peace and reassurance falling from it like scattered flowers. Prodigal she was in this her scattering, as though she knew the supply would never fail.

Was then the whole thing a part of his dream, he wondered? Had he not imagined it all, the impossible perfection? And, if he had not, through what hard ways had Iris Hadley come to gather her blossoms of love and understanding? Mr. Bremble knew well that these treasures are bought with a price, and when he thought of Iris Hadley paying that price he trembled.

It brought forth in him no curiosity about her past life as lives are usually spoken of. He neither knew nor cared whether she were widowed, divorced, or, in contradiction of what he had heard, unmarried. He did not know or care to know what sort of husband she might have had, or whether there had ever been children. It was the biography of her soul that interested Mr. Bremble, and with regard to that his curiosity nearly burned him alive. That night, alone with God, he felt the question heavy within him and knew that it could not be hidden from his Companion. "What do You suppose—" he ventured at last, half afraid.

But God only smiled inscrutably, shaking His head. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Henry," He advised. "You'd better go to sleep now, don't you think?"

Mr. Bremble sighed. When God would communicate He would, and when He wouldn't He wouldn't. There was nothing anybody could do about it. "Well, all right," he said meekly enough, turning over.

* 12 *

HENRY BREMBLE, what have you been up to now?" Amelia demanded, breathing heavily, some two weeks later.

He looked at her, mildly surprised. "Nothing that I know of, Amelia. Why?"

Amelia sat down. "You had a visitor this afternoon," she said in a voice pregnant with significance.

"A visitor?"

"Yes, a visitor. The most extraordinary child—a little guttersnipe from the other end of nowhere, I should say, from the way she looked. She said her name was Myrna or Morna or some such preposterous—"

"Myrna," said Mr. Bremble nervously. "What'd she want?"

"She brought back two books she said you'd given her—said you'd told her you could get her more if she wanted them. And when I told her you weren't home yet she wouldn't go away. Just sat there, looking stupid, and waiting. I told her it would be hours before you'd come home, but not a word would she say. Just sat there. And then the doorbell rang—it turned out to be a vacuum cleaner sales-

man—and while I was out of the room she tried to steal a dollar out of my purse."

Mr. Bremble blinked. "Myrna did?"

"Myrna certainly did—if that's what you call her. Now don't begin trying to tell me I was mistaken, Henry. I tell you she did; she had it in her hand when I got back. She made up some story about it falling out of the purse and she had just picked it up, but I never leave my purse un-snapped, as you know very well." Amelia sighed heavily. "Sometimes, Henry, I declare to you I'm at my wits' end to make you out! If you must make friends with children, you might at least pick out decent children. Buying books for a wretched little rat like that, on your salary! I don't care if they were second-hand books—" Mr. Bremble remembered with a gust of thankfulness that Iris Hadley, that incomparable woman, had torn out the flyleaves with her name on them—"you know very well you can't afford it. Well, I sent her packing then, believe me, and I hope the whole thing will be a lesson to you. I don't suppose even you will want to go on buying presents for an out-and-out little thief."

Mr. Bremble, when he was alone, thought the matter over. He was greatly puzzled. He would certainly not have said that Myrna was flawless, but he would have sworn that she was honest. There was a candor about her that was convincing. He could no more imagine her stealing from Amelia's purse than he could have imagined God doing the same.

Yet he believed Amelia to be a truthful woman according to her lights. No matter how she disliked the child, she would not have trumped up such a story about her. Since Amelia said Myrna had tried to take the money, she must have done so. But why?

He was surprised, moreover, that Myrna had known where to come, for she had never asked him where he lived. He could only suppose that she had followed him home, in that watchful, silent way of hers, after one of their queer conversations, and that she had convinced Amelia this afternoon—who knew by what graphic description?—that the man who had given her the books was Mr. Bremble.

She had returned the books, too. That did not look like dishonesty. He had thought she understood the books were a gift and not a loan, but obviously she had not so understood, and had duly brought them back before she asked for more. This, Mr. Bremble felt, was authentic; this was Myrna as he knew her. The stealing of the dollar was not Myrna.

He supposed he would never be able to find out the truth, for he knew that he would be too much embarrassed to ask her. But he did walk past the cottage in the hope of seeing Myrna, and when she caught sight of him she turned swiftly as if to run into the house.

She halted in a moment, however, and came back out, her head hanging, her cheeks dusky with embarrassment, the very picture of conscious guilt. As she approached him, she visibly threw off her hangdog look and grew painfully airy, and when he reached the gate and paused, looking at her, she laughed.

"I guess that lady told you about me and her pocketbook," she said lightly.

Mr. Bremble nodded. "Yes, she did, Myrna."

"She got back too soon," Myrna explained calmly. A spasm of some sort crossed her face; she blinked. "If she'd 'a' stayed out there with that ole salesman just another half a minute—" She bit her lip, which was showing a tendency

to tremble. "Aw, what do I care? I don't want to be in their old play anyhow. When I get big I'll be in a real play—I'll be in more plays—"

She gulped and fell silent, looking at him. Mr. Bremble hesitated. "What—what was it you wanted the money for, Myrna?"

"I wanted to join my mother and my daddy into the Modern Parents." Myrna flung back her bang and sniffed resentfully. "What do I care about their old tree and how many flowers it's got on it, I'd just like to know? They can take their old tree and—"

"Tree?" Mr. Bremble blinked now; there seemed to be no connecting thread of sense in what the child was telling him. "The Modern Parents?"

Myrna gave a sigh of exasperation that would have done credit to Amelia herself. "Aw, they got a silly old tree up on the board at school," she explained, loftily, "and if your mother joins the Parents they put a bud on it, or if your father joins they put a bud, but if both of 'em join they put a whole flower." She essayed, somewhat painfully, to sneer. "Bunch o' babies, that's what they are."

Mr. Bremble, still bewildered, sat down on the sidewalk. After a moment Myrna came and sat down morosely beside him.

"Why didn't you ask your mother—" Mr. Bremble began.

"I did, but she wasn't innarested." Myrna sniffed again. "She said she wasn't innarested in joining any poky ole Modern Parents. She said she had a lot o' better things to do than that. And I couldn't ask Daddy because he isn't home. So I thought I'd join 'em in myself if I could get the money. It's fifty cents for your mother and fifty cents for

your father. They don't care if anybody goes to the meetings or not. My teacher said our room would of had the best record in school if it hadn't been for me."

"Best record?" Mr. Bremble prodded patiently.

"Every single room in school has got one o' these ole baby-face trees," Myrna went on in a rigidly superior tone, "with buds and flowers on it, and every room tries to beat every other room, see? And if your parents don't join, the teacher doesn't like you, because she wants the room to have a good record. They make the buds and flowers out of gold paper," Myrna added, her voice faltering a little, "and put your name on them in silver ink."

"Well, but, Myrna," Mr. Bremble tried to comfort her, "surely no teacher would—"

"She does too," Myrna insisted, blinking furiously. "She just hates me because I spoiled our record for the room, and all the kids hate me too, but I don't care." She blinked several times in rapid succession. "They call me stingy-guts and ask me don't my mother have enough time off from her boy friends to join the Modern Parents, and they asked me was my father on the town! Everybody that gets a whole flower on the tree gets to be in the play."

"The play?"

"They're goin' to have a play at school when the drive is over, and everybody that gets a flower on the tree for both their mother and their daddy gets to be in it, and the one that has the best grades gets to be the Prince and the Princess!" Myrna kicked the grass contemptuously. "I always had the best grades of any of the girls in my room till my teacher got mad at me," she stated defensively.

"But—"

"She did too," Myrna contradicted him. "Yesterday all

my spelling words were right and she said I couldn't have a star because they weren't wrote-written-good enough! She said I blotted my paper, and I did not either blot my paper. I bet she blotted some ink onto it herself, the old—" Myrna gulped. "The Princess gets to wear a gold crown with a star."

Mr. Bremble felt a dismaying tendency of his own underlip to tremble. He felt that, sometime in the near future, he was going to be very, very angry; so angry that even now he could feel a tidal wave of wrath rising within him. But at the moment his pity had the upper hand. He gulped as hard as Myrna herself had gulped, and she looked at him defiantly. "It's just a lot of baby-face stuff, isn't it?" she demanded of him, holding his gaze indomitably with hers. "Isn't it a lot of baby-face stuff? Isn't it?"

Mr. Bremble, clearing his throat, put his arm around her; and at that Myrna, without the slightest preliminary change of expression, opened her mouth and began to bawl, unrestrainedly, like a two-year-old baby. For a moment she bawled blindly, into the air; then, with a convulsive jerk, she flung herself against his shoulder and continued bawling.

Mr. Bremble was alarmed. "Sh, shh, Myrna," he besought her in a frightened whisper, for he was sure that anybody who heard her—and the whole world must certainly be hearing her—would think he was torturing her to death. "Hush, Myrna, hush. Don't mind it. You're right—it's just a lot of baby stuff—"

But at this Myrna bawled the louder. "It is not, either," he made out through her anguished bellows. "It is not, either! It's a l-l-lovely play with fairies just like in that book you brought me, and I can't ever have a flower with my name

on it on the tree, or even a bud, and everybody hates me, and I spoiled the record—”

Mr. Bremble, clasping her to him with one arm, took out his handkerchief, and tried to wipe her eyes. At first she resisted him furiously; then, suddenly collapsing, she subsided into moans and let him attend her, obediently blowing her nose when he told her to.

As her sobs subsided he sat with his arm tight around her, patting her uncertainly with his other hand. At length she was quiet, save for a periodic sniff; she had rolled his handkerchief up into a ball and unrolled it again. “Do you belong to the Modern Parents?” she asked him, between two sniffs.

“No, I don’t,” said Mr. Bremble hastily, adding to himself a measurably bitter “Thank God.”

“I wisht I could of joined my mother and my daddy,” said Myrna, but without enthusiasm, “so I could of had a flower.”

“But you couldn’t join for your mother and father, Myrna, if they—”

“Sure I could. Lots of kids do. They don’t ask you. All you haf to do is write your mother’s name on a blank they give you to take home, and pay the fifty cents.”

Mr. Bremble cleared his throat. “Do they tell you at school what it’s for, the Modern Parents, when they give you those blanks to take home?”

Myrna shook her head. “They don’t haf to tell us. Everybody knows what it’s for.”

“What is it for, Myrna?” he asked gently.

“They have meetings at school,” said Myrna, “and talk about things. And we get to serve the refreshments.”

“I see,” said Mr. Bremble grimly.

Myrna sniffed. "I wisht I could of got that dollar and joined my mother and my daddy," she said again.

The dreary, hopeless resignation in her voice was too much for Mr. Bremble; he acted against his conscience. He took out his wallet, removed from it a one-dollar bill, and gave it to Myrna. "This is for you, Myrna," he said unsteadily, "to do anything you want to. But if I were you I'd buy myself a book."

Myrna's eyes were instantly starry. She shook her head. "But then I wouldn't get my flower!" she breathed excitedly. "Maybe I can even be the Princess now!" Her innocent gaze fell softly on his troubled face. "What's your name?" she suddenly demanded.

"My name is Henry Bremble," said Mr. Bremble.

"It's a nice name," said Myrna softly. "Can I kiss you?" She did so, gently and cautiously, and sat back much pleased. "My mother always kisses George when he gives her a present," she explained.

Mr. Bremble's face twitched, but before he could reply Myrna was smitten with a brilliant idea. "Mr. Bremble," she cried ecstatically, "don't you want to join the Modern Parents too? Then I'd have a flower and a bud, both, and be ahead of everybody! They don't care if it isn't your parents," she hastily forestalled his possible objection. "They just want the names and the fifty cents—or maybe you haven't got another fifty cents?" she added anxiously.

Mr. Bremble gave her fifty cents, and she kissed him again. "Good-by," she cried rapturously, "I've got to go in now and find those blanks, Mr.—what did you say your name was?—I've got to write it down, you know, and your address, and I've forgotten—what did you say it was?"

Mr. Bremble got up, putting his wallet back into his pocket. "Judas Iscariot," he said curtly, "26 Linden Avenue."

Myrna paused on her dancing feet to look back at him. "How do you spell—why, that's not what you said before, is it?"

The anger which, a few short minutes ago, had threatened to engulf Mr. Bremble did not arise. Its place was taken by a sick distaste, a nausea so violent that it threatened physical manifestations. He prolonged his walk, not wishing to go home. He told himself that he would say nothing to Amelia, lest her answer make him sicker than he was, but he found it after all impossible to be silent, and two days later he gave in.

"Do you happen to know much of anything about the Modern Parents Organization, Amelia?" he asked her that night as they prepared for bed.

Amelia, who was suddenly and inexplicably in a good humor, laughed. "What a question, Henry! Why, I organized it here in the first place. You certainly know—or you ought to—that I've been membership captain for two years. The movement has already spread all over the state and they're talking about the state captaincy for me on the strength of my record."

Mr. Bremble gazed at her. "What does a membership captain do?" he asked, much as he had asked his mother the same question about many other things, in his childhood.

"Why, plan drives and things to increase the membership, of course. I've done pretty well, if I do say it myself." Amelia chuckled complacently. "This year, especially, in the spring drive we've been having. I had such a good idea, and it has

worked out far beyond my expectations. It makes use of the child's competitive instinct, you see. Each room has a picture of a tree on the board, and each child who gets his father and mother to join gets a little gold flower—so pretty—pasted on the tree with his name on it. And then we're putting on a little play for the last day of school, and the children who stand best in their classes—”

“I see,” said Mr. Bremble, who thought it judicious not to listen to more. “That was your own idea, Amelia?”

“Entirely my own idea.” Amelia beamed. “It's really nice, Henry, to find you taking an interest at last in the things I'm trying to do for child welfare. I do think Dr. Willoughby is doing you good. The children, bless their hearts, have had a world of fun out of the whole thing, and membership has increased by leaps and bounds—forty per cent over last year's. I dare say it will be a national organization one day—though that, of course, will have its drawbacks.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Bremble.

“Oh, I don't know—a national organization is always setting up rules and what not, and it tends to hamper one's ideas. Still, of course, it has great possibilities too.” Amelia brightened, and Mr. Bremble, fascinated, watched her dream of national eminence take shape with her mounting elation. Her face was entirely clear now; she nodded. “Yes, it would be a great thing, Henry, and I guess there's no doubt it will happen. In a few years the Modern Parents will probably have a membership of three or four million.”

Amelia finished braiding her hair and fastened it with a rubber band. “Didn't you hear me, Henry?” she asked him brightly. “I say the national membership of Modern Parents will probably go into the millions one of these days.”

“I shouldn't be surprised,” said Henry Bremble.

* 13 *

NEXT evening Mrs. Corey and Queenie came to dinner, and Mr. Bremble, who had spent a fruitless day at the office trying to fathom Amelia's sudden blossoming into confidence and good spirits, received enlightenment. The two women were talking excitedly when he came in, and they took but little notice of him then or later, when they had seated themselves in their places at the table.

"There she was, as big as life, Mother," Amelia recounted with what seemed to him remarkable gusto, "sitting in this booth at Melcher's with Tom Jenkins, a married man, mind you, with four children, and old enough almost to be her grandfather, flirting with him and making eyes at him for all she was worth. I tell you, I don't know what the younger generation is coming to."

Amelia took several spoonfuls of soup with evident enjoyment. "It will be a bitter blow to her poor mother if she finds out about it," she added pleasantly, looking at Mrs. Corey, with, it seemed to Mr. Bremble, considerable significance.

Mrs. Corey cackled appreciatively. "She'll find out about it all right," she assured her daughter, seeming to share

Amelia's satisfaction. "Some kind friend will tell her all about it, won't they, Queenie?" She fed the dog a chocolate from an open box at her side.

"Well, somebody really ought to," Amelia said. She paused, as if considering the matter from all angles. "If she'd ever been particularly nice to me I'd feel I ought to tell her myself—I'd certainly thank anyone who told me my daughter was carrying on with married men!—but the way things are I can hardly consider myself responsible, really. If she can't control her own daughter's actions—and setting herself up for such an authority on youth problems—"

Mrs. Corey cackled again. "Youth problems!" she repeated, grinning with enjoyment. "My, you certainly got all those words down to a T, Amelia. Hasn't she, Queenie? Youth problems, blueprints for democracy, get down to the grass roots, and all work shoulder to shoulder for a better world—"

Amelia bridled, but she was too thoroughly pleased and stimulated really to take offense. "Well, what is wrong with any of those terms, Mother?"

"I never said there was anything wrong with 'em, did I?" Mrs. Corey retorted. "I like 'em." She chuckled again. "I never heard a preacher in my life was the beat of you, Amelia, when you get down to the grass roots and start workin' shoulder to shoulder. My, my, my!"

"That's the title of my next address to the League," Amelia said complacently, diverted for the moment from her promising scandal. "'Shoulder to Shoulder—A Blueprint for the Future.' Rather good, don't you think?" She paused to meditate. "I think I'll go over it before I give it, though. There are so many topics to deal with on a subject like that, I'm afraid I've rather neglected the problems of

modern youth. I think perhaps I'd better add something about that."

"I would," said Mrs. Corey, for some reason finding this hilarious. "I certainly would if I was you, Amelia."

"I may have something to say," Amelia continued, warming, "about parents who set themselves up as authorities on youth problems and all the time their own daughters are running wild—"

"You do that, Amelia," said Mrs. Corey, grinning. "That'll fix her just about right, won't it, Queenie?"

Mr. Bremble, who felt that he had been ignored long enough, put in a fretful question. "Fix whom?" he asked insistently. "I don't think it's very polite, Amelia, to talk all through dinner about something without telling me what it is. Whose daughter is running wild? What girl is it that's carrying on with—"

"We're talking about Margery Carruthers, Henry," explained Amelia patiently. Her voice took on a pious tone of regret. "Poor Mrs. Carruthers hasn't an idea of what's going on, and, as I said, it would certainly be the part of a friend to tell her. However, as she's never given me any reason to consider her my friend—when I look back and remember how she's worked to get that presidency away from me!—However, that's neither here nor there. The thing, of course, is that poor young girl's foolhardiness and danger." Amelia's eyes sparkled delightedly. "But I dare say her mother'll find it out soon enough. Those things get around, you know. You can see what a blow it's going to be to Mrs. Carruthers, the way she sets herself up as an authority and all—"

Mr. Bremble nodded slowly. "Yes," he said, "I see." And he pushed his soup plate away from him, for he saw, he was

afraid, a great deal more than that. He saw Amelia, that juggernaut of the organizational world, securely and triumphantly riding over the mangled body of her rival to reinstatement in the presidency of the League for Democracy. Mr. Bremble cared little what happened to either the body or the spirit of Mrs. Carruthers or any other member of the League, but when it came to Margery it was a different thing.

Mr. Bremble liked Margery Carruthers. She was the only young person in his limited acquaintance who did not consider him to be, by mere virtue of his forty-one years of life, an abandoned and all but buried fossil. Margery was a pretty, gay young creature who flirted as naturally as she breathed, and with the same impartiality. She had often flirted with Mr. Bremble, filling him with surprise and dewy delight. He had no doubt whatever that if she had flirted with Tom Jenkins at Melcher's soda fountain, that same Mr. Jenkins, dry and dreary from the onslaughts of years of matrimonial weather, had known exactly the same surprise and delight and no more. As for Margery, she had probably never thought of the man again. She had, as was proper to her age and station, other fish to fry.

All this, Mr. Bremble felt, should have been as obvious to Amelia as it was to him, even discounting that well-known streak of jealous dislike of middle age for joyous youth, of which he had more than once seen evidence in Amelia. Suppose, for instance, that it had been he, Henry Bremble, with whom she had discovered Margery flirting? She would not have given it a second thought. No, it was for the weapon, the weapon in her hand, the weapon thrust upon her at her moment of great need—at the moment when all she valued was trembling in the balance—that Amelia seized

the empty bladder of a harmless incident, set it to her lips, and blew it into menacing size for explosion. She would go about it cautiously, of course, not seeming to blow. But, looking at her across the dinner table that night, he saw that she had her lips already pursed.

"You know, Mother," Amelia said now, with another significant glance at Mrs. Corey, "I did think maybe I'd call up Mrs. Cable after dinner, and see what she thinks about it. She knows Mrs. Carruthers better than I do, and—"

Mrs. Corey laughed explosively into her glass of water and was taken by a fit of coughing. "Why'n't you call up Mrs. Baker?" she demanded, gasping, as soon as she could speak. "It'd be quicker."

"Now, Mother!" Amelia's lips twitched in spite of herself into a half-smile, but she quickly controlled them. "Shame on you, Mother. Do you think I want to make things worse than they already are, either for that poor silly little girl or for Mrs. Carruthers? You know what an awful gossip Mrs. Baker is and how she stretches things. By the time she got through with it, she'd have Margery and Tom Jenkins running off to a hotel together." There was a pregnant silence; the eyes of the two women met and held. "Mrs. Baker's quite a close friend of Mrs. Cable's, anyway," Amelia added inconsequently after a moment.

She rose from her place, unable to finish her dinner, and went to the telephone and called Mrs. Cable's number. Mrs. Corey, immediately bustling, gathered up Queenie and followed her. From where he sat Mr. Bremble could hear Amelia's voice take on the caressing accents customary with her in talking to the other ladies of the Better World organizations.

"Mrs. Cable?" cooed Amelia sweetly. "I do hope I'm not

interrupting your dinner. . . . Yes, this is Amelia Bremble, Mrs. Cable. I just thought I'd call you, because I've been terribly upset over something I saw downtown today, and I really didn't know what I ought to do about it. And I thought to myself, there's dear Mrs. Cable, always so understanding and kind; maybe she could advise me. Mother thought so too. . . . Oh, no, no, no, dear, I'm not being sweet at all; when I'm in any trouble or perplexity, I think of you first thing—yes, I do, I really mean it. Well, this was how it was, Mrs. Cable—”

And Amelia lowered her voice. For a time Mr. Bremble could make nothing of the scraps he heard; then Amelia, somewhat relaxed, uttered a sudden little trill of laughter. “Oh, now, Mrs. Cable, I didn't say that! I didn't say anything at all about a hotel. If you'll just think back, my dear, you'll remember all I said was a public place.” There was a pause. “Why, no, it's not the same thing at all, is it? Well, I didn't know that. Well, you bad thing, if you want to think it was a hotel I suppose there's nothing I can do about it.”

She trilled with laughter again. Mrs. Corey, hovering at her side, shook with suppressed merriment.

“But I was just thinking, Mrs. Cable,” Amelia went on after a moment, her voice rotundly regretful, “what a sad, sad thing this is going to be for our dear Mrs. Carruthers. So prominent in all kinds of good works, you know!—I beg your pardon? Well, yes, that's what I was just saying to Henry at dinner; good works ought to begin at home. I may be old-fashioned in thinking so, but . . . Tell me, Mrs. Cable, how do you feel about—excuse me for changing the subject, my dear, but you know I'm making a little address at the next meeting of the League, and this whole unpleasant incident has made me wonder if I ought not to say some-

thing about the quality of the leadership we can expect in our organizations. The standards, you know, that we must maintain if we are to keep our work on its present high level of achievement and worth? Don't you agree with me that that is pretty important?—Well, I was sure you would. I was just saying to Henry before I called you, 'I'm sure Mrs. Cable would agree with me that we have to have leaders who stand for something in the community, whose lives are an open book for all to read. Henry,' I said, 'I know Mrs. Cable. I've worked with her through thick and thin for three years now, and whenever there's a question of right and wrong and you find out which side is the right one, right there on that side you'll find Mrs. Cable every time!' —Oh, yes, I did, and not for the first time either. Henry agrees with me, too; he always does. I beg your pardon? Oh, he's fine."

Amelia stirred uncomfortably in her chair. "He's up and about again"—Mr. Bremble started—"not a bit the worse for his little illness, sharp as it was while it lasted. I beg your pardon?—My dear, you don't mean you haven't heard? Why, yes, he was quite ill, very ill indeed. You can imagine how I felt that day of the party." She laughed. "I could have murdered him in his tracks, poor angel; but how was I to know that at that very moment he had a temperature of a hundred and five and was completely out of his head? We had a time here for a while, I can assure you! Yes, indeed. Yes, oh, yes. It was a dreadful experience, but it's all over now, I'm so thankful to say. . . . Well, I mustn't keep you any longer, Mrs. Cable, busy woman that you are. Oh, by the way!" Amelia's voice sank somewhat, but Mr. Bremble could still hear. "You won't speak of that little matter to anyone, Mrs. Cable, will you?—Yes, of course I did know

that you wouldn't. I knew you'd understand that all I told you was said in the strictest confidence. You notice, for instance, that I didn't call up Mrs. Baker." Amelia laughed fondly into the telephone. "I'd never dream of telling Mrs. Baker a thing like that—no, I'm sure it wouldn't be wise. We all love her, of course, and know what a dear she really is at heart, but her tongue does rather run away with the poor darling at times, doesn't it? Such a pity, because we all know there isn't an atom of malice in her—Yes, isn't it? Well, good-by, Mrs. Cable."

She hung up the receiver and, followed at a respectful distance by her mother and Queenie, re-entered the dining room, with the quiet satisfaction of a winning candidate, to attack her cooling dinner. As she sat down she met—for she could not well avoid them—the hot and accusing eyes of her wordless husband.

Amelia tossed her head. "I had to tell her something, didn't I?" she asked.

* 14 *

M R. BREMBLE was given pause. In his first moment of privacy he got out his sabotaged button collection and meticulously examined Miss Iris's box for chocolate, but to his relief none could be detected. He drew a long breath and opened the box, turning the button about and about, and thinking. In the short time he had known Miss Iris he had firmly formed the habit of turning to her in all emergencies, but now, though he could not doubt her willingness, he knew that he could not possibly approach her. To confront her with the threat to Margery Carruthers would necessitate his telling her of Amelia, and the thought of revealing to her what Amelia had done was appalling beyond any contemplation. He could as easily have gone stark naked to the Paterson house for a call.

Sorely indeed, and not for the first time, Mr. Bremble reflected on the incredible callousness of women like Amelia, who did not seem to have the faintest inkling of realization that a man's wife, in her public character, is as much a part of himself as his right leg. If his own right leg had been covered with festering sores and stripped bare for all the world to see, Mr. Bremble could not have felt a sharper humili-

tion than he felt at the possibility that Amelia's political maneuverings should ever be seen in all their loathsome purulence by anybody, anybody at all, outside the four walls of his home. And that Miss Iris should see them!—No, he could never tell her.

Indeed, and entirely apart from any possible danger to Margery Carruthers' reputation, he could not bear to think in the same breath, as it were, of Miss Iris and Amelia. He did not want Miss Iris to know that Amelia existed. It was not of Amelia, he felt, that he wanted to tell her, or of anything else so corseted and swollen. The idea of swelling, the swelling of sores, obsessed him. He covered Miss Iris's box and put her away.

He tried to put her away in his memory too, for his dream of talking with her had become a yearning, a very agony. With each fresh assault on his sensibilities, the cool, calm thought of her increased his inner frenzy. And he was so tired, so tired of feeling frenzied.

He was tired, in fact, of everything he knew. Tired of Amelia and her organizational prattle; tired of Mrs. Corey and Queenie; tired unto death of the sight and the smell of chocolate, of the sight and smell of the clawlike hands that clutched it. He was tired of thinking of Susy and Willy and Myrna. He felt no satisfaction that he had possibly helped them. Nobody could help them to any perceptible extent; they were lost, as he himself was lost, in a trackless waste. Wherever they walked, they walked forever alone. What was the song he had once heard Clarissa singing? "You got to walk down a lonesome valley"? Well, the lonesomeness, if that had been all, could perhaps be borne. But now, as he remembered Clarissa's song, he wondered if he had heard the words aright. Loathsome valley, surely, would be

nearer. "You got to walk down a loathsome valley. . . ."

His pleasure in his button collection, except for the button Miss Iris, was being systematically ruined, as the sand-paper days scraped past him, by Amelia. Prompted, no doubt, by the counsel of Dr. Willoughby, she endeavored to turn his hobby, as she called it, into something constructive. She babbled endlessly of buttons, using terms he had never heard and had no desire to hear; she spoke of heraldics and colonials and initials, of glint, steel, story, trade and square. She spoke of grapes and paisley, of pimpernels and scrimshaw. She dwelt on jet, perpetual, and paper-weight; and she had made a box and divided it into sections and covered it with flowered cretonne, entreating him to classify his collection and label it.

He could not doubt that she had put many hours of research into buttons, their history and their nature, and her almost tearful protests at his obduracy distressed him. "I only want to help you, can't you see, Henry?" she would say, the lower of her two chins quivering. "I should think you'd be only too glad and grateful to have me take an interest in your hobby. Not many wives in my position would, after you'd shown so little consideration for their feelings, and as busy as I always am, as you very well know."

She paused, but quite as usual he did not answer. "I've always tried my best to be a good wife to you, Henry, and I'd always supposed, though you didn't say much, that you realized it. I've always tried to do my duty by you and I always will. I'd have gone into this button business long ago if you hadn't been so secretive about the whole thing, hiding all those buttons away like that and never saying a word. Dr. Willoughby says if you'd only—Henry! Are you listening to me or aren't you?"

He would look at her mildly. "What did you say, Amelia?"

At this she would catch her breath in an angry and frightened sob. "Henry Bremble, you haven't heard a word I've said! I declare, sometimes I think Dr. Willoughby's right and the only thing to do—"

She caught herself up then, hastily, and looked at him with fear in her eyes, lest he should realize her meaning. But Mr. Bremble, looking back at her apparently quite undisturbed, knew very well what she meant, for he had more than once seen a sanitarium looming behind Dr. Willoughby's Oxford glasses.

The first time he had seen it, it had frightened him. But his very fear enhanced the game he was playing. If the risk was heightened, the pleasure was heightened also. The thing had turned into an exciting obstacle race of a new and different kind, with himself, Henry Bremble, setting up the obstacles, and Dr. Willoughby warily climbing over them in pursuit—now seeming to gain on his quarry, now baffled and halted. In the course of a recent interview he had informed Dr. Willoughby, matter-of-factly, that God was and always had been a close personal friend of his and that many new buttons awaited him in God's heaven.

This news had halted the good doctor perceptibly, for until now religious mania had seemed no part of Mr. Bremble's illness. It brought him to a standstill, in fact, for the whole body of evidence had to be reconsidered and reanalyzed in the light of it. Mr. Bremble, with the momentary panting gaiety of a fox who has left the pack nonplussed and whimpering, had smiled with satisfaction as he lay quietly on the couch, his eyes closed, awaiting the next probing question.

He no longer depended on the *Psychiatrist's Guide and Archives* for inspiration. He had an endless fund within himself. Imagination, that most dangerous of toys, grows with the handling, and Mr. Bremble had played with it perhaps more intensely and recklessly than most. There were times, nowadays, when he himself scarcely knew that there were no buttons in heaven—who could know such a thing positively, after all?—or that his great-aunt Emma, never having had any corporeal existence, could probably not have had six toes on one of her feet? He had made up great-aunt Emma, to be sure. But who was to say that she did not even now exist in some untraveled sphere of creation, treading her six-toed way under alien skies? Time and space and matter, nay life itself, were losing their significance to Mr. Bremble. What was the past? What was the present? What was the future? Who knew?

Not Henry Bremble, certainly. For all Henry Bremble knew, the evangelical heaven of his Sunday-school days might be a stupendous reality, with all its gaudy garnishings of harps and halos and palm branches and streets of gold. He rather hoped it was. What a fine sight that would be on Judgment Day, and how bewildered Mrs. Corey and Dr. Willoughby would look in their halos!

What a fine thing it would be, too, to see perdition spurt up in Amelia's garden, snapping off the heads of the marigolds and whirling them up and away amid sparks of brimstone! In Mr. Bremble's imagination the headless stems, writhing against their stakes in the fires of hell, assumed the look and character of so many Horace Widdingers, caught at last and put where they belonged. Could he not hear the flying heads, strangling in smoke, give tongue? "Henrietta,

help! Henrietta! For God's sake, Henrietta, do something!
Save me!"

But they would get no help from Henry Bremble.

So, driven to dreams that were not at all of Miss Iris—for he could not dream of her and go on enduring—Mr. Bremble ventured farther and farther into that dim bourn from which, in a world peopled with Amelias and Dr. Willoughbys, no traveler has any too great a hope of returning. In a sanitarium, if sanitarium it was to be, he could perhaps, in a manner of speaking, take Miss Iris with him; and there, sitting on the green lawn with which he understood such places were often supplied, with only a bored attendant to deter him, he might be able to speak to her at last. He did not know whether they would let him have his buttons or his crossword puzzles, but they could not possibly stop his making words out of words, and they could never take Miss Iris from him.

Upon this subject he found God somewhat reticent. Although God, with His usual temperance and justice, seemed willing to consider its various aspects, He would not commit Himself to an opinion. "Well, now, I don't know about that, Henry," He would sometimes reply abstractedly to Mr. Bremble's thoughts. "I don't know but you'd be better off to forget the whole business, maybe." But this, or something like it, was as far as He would go.

Mr. Bremble realized that much of his depression was due to his helplessness in the face of the thing Amelia had done to Margery Carruthers. But in spite of his helplessness he hesitated to approach God with his question, for he remembered, too vividly, God's displeasure at his active intercession for the Italian child who had been so cruelly

beaten. That intercession, certainly, had savored somewhat of prayer; and Mr. Bremble, who did not know what prayer was, was afraid of it.

He had his theories, of course. Supposing God to be, as Mr. Bremble believed Him to be and as certain old catechisms set Him forth, "a Being infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth," Mr. Bremble felt strongly that the prayer of the believer was a brief one. Four words of one syllable each were enough to express it: Thy will be done. Anything less than this, thought Mr. Bremble, was doubt, and anything beyond it was impertinence.

He had reached this conclusion after certain painful ponderings connected with the Italian child. He had gone beyond this limit, and offended. Having learned from God's own lips that God knew of the child's plight and was concerned, he had pressed for further reassurance; he had begged to be told that all would be well with the child from that time forth, not only in this world but in a supposable next one. The absurdity of this demand, in view of his personal knowledge and experience of God, had been apparent to him almost at once.

Coming to his first and final conclusion as to the nature of prayer, Mr. Bremble had felt a little forlorn, but only for a very short time. As he dwelt more and more upon the idea, it became more and more exciting to him—so exciting, in fact, that in the face of almost inevitable reprobation, he actually broached it on one occasion to Amelia.

Amelia shook her head. "Don't be sacrilegious, Henry," she admonished him. "The idea of your wanting to cut the Lord's Prayer down to a single sentence!"

"The Lord's Prayer?" Mr. Bremble repeated, stopped.

"Certainly, the Lord's Prayer. That's what you're quoting from, isn't it? The Lord's Prayer doesn't stop with 'Thy will be done.' It asks for a number of other things."

"But it doesn't, Amelia." Mr. Bremble, in his eagerness to make someone else free of his experience, ventured to the point of flat contradiction. "All the other things are there, right in that one phrase. Don't you see, if God is good, they're all implied in it? If He's good and His will is done, we'll have our daily bread and all the rest of it; we'll forgive those who—"

Amelia smiled patronizingly. "The Lord's Prayer, as it stands, has given a good deal of satisfaction for a pretty long time," she instructed him. "I'm sure I can't imagine what you think would be gained by mutilating it—"

"But I'm not—"

"And that's to say nothing at all of the comfort you'd be taking away from thousands of people who love that prayer and believe in it. I'm surprised at you, Henry. 'Thy will be done,' indeed! A fine comfort that would be, all by itself. Isn't there enough sadness in the world without going out of our way to attack the few things that bring relief? I must say I never cared much about the idea of resignation, anyway."

Mr. Bremble sighed and gave it up. He had heard enough to know that never in a thousand years could he hope to make Amelia see that what she considered comfortless was not only comfort, but ecstasy; not loneliness, but peace; not resignation—ah, never resignation—but adventure! "We too take ship, O soul. . . . O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God? O farther, farther sail!"

Amelia's soul, he feared, was not a sailor. There was nobody else with whom he could hope to share his discovery.

Naturally he would have liked to ask God Himself about it, but the slight testiness of God's one reference to the subject had discouraged him. "I give you My word, Henry," God had once observed, "to hear them praying at Me on Sundays, you'd think I was running a supply house of some kind. 'I want six loads of this and a couple of bundles of that,' they'll say, 'and for Thine own sake don't send me any more of this miserable worm-eaten stuff I've been kept on for years. Don't I deserve a little consideration after the life I've lived?' Well, now, who lives their lives for them? I don't. They won't let Me. Yet they seem to think it's all My fault they don't have any fun." God smiled. "It's a little wearing at times, but I suppose they mean well. I will say for you, Henry, you never make any attempt to run My own business for Me—hardly ever, anyway."

So Mr. Bremble did not pray for Margery, but assumed as firmly as he could that God would manage without him. Nevertheless he could not rid himself of a feeling of guilty responsibility. By virtue of that same tie which made Amelia's disgrace his own, he felt that he, being married to her, had sinned.

So deep into abstraction had he fallen that he was only faintly disturbed by the minor hubbub that broke out on Amelia's discovery that "that Mrs. Hadley" had a house guest. "It's some girl," Amelia told Mrs. Corey, whose beak-like nose was twitching with interest. "She's pregnant—the girl is, I mean. Of course, one doesn't have any way of knowing what the situation really is. A good many young men are still overseas, you know. It may be a married niece or something. I suppose it could be, Mother."

Mrs. Corey shook her head. "'Tain't likely," she pro-

nounced with a good deal of vigor. "Birds of a feather. You mark my words, Amelia, there's something corny there."

Amelia laughed indulgently. "Don't you mean 'something fishy,' Mother?"

"No, I don't mean 'something fishy,'" retorted Mrs. Corey stoutly. "I said 'something corny,' didn't I? Move with the times, Amelia." She appealed to Queenie, all but asleep on her lap. "Amelia's just an old stick-in-the-mud, ain't she, Queenie? Ain't she, Queenie, you nice old sweet girl you?"

Queenie made no reply, and Amelia smiled. "Oh, well, have it your own way, Mother. I suppose your age entitles you to do as you like about slang, if you must use slang at all—"

"That's all right about my age," said Mrs. Corey truculently.

"—but I must say," Amelia continued, still indulgent, "that I'm inclined to agree with you that there's something fishy—"

"Corny," interposed Mrs. Corey obstinately.

"—and always has been, not only about that girl but about Mrs. Hadley herself. I've had a feeling right from the start, as I've often told you, Mother, that she's no more married than—than Queenie is," said Amelia, growing excited. "She hasn't got so much as a snapshot picture of any husband she ever happened to have about the house, at least in any of the parts of it I could see. And the day Mrs. Cable and I called on her, Mrs. Cable dropped a hint or two that we'd like to know a little about how the land lay, but she never seemed to take it in at all."

"Didn't?" asked Mrs. Corey, interested.

Amelia shook her head. "And I suppose she's being just as tight-mouthed about this girl. I saw the girl as I went by

there yesterday, sitting out in that old tumbledown shed—such an eyesore!—it should have been pulled down years ago—and I couldn't get away from the feeling I'd seen her somewhere. But for the life of me I couldn't remember where." Amelia knitted her brows.

It was at this point in the conversation that Mr. Bremble felt faintly disturbed. If Amelia, who had no doubt seen Susy Jennings at some time in the plumbing office, succeeded in dredging up the memory from its present oblivion, it might well be that some uncomfortable hours awaited him, for he knew Amelia's persistence in ferreting, once she had begun. He could not hope to conceal, from an Amelia enlightened as to Susy Jennings' identity, the fact of his own acquaintance with Mrs. Hadley.

But it did not seem, after all, to matter much. Hardly anything, felt Mr. Bremble, mattered at all. He wondered why God thought the system worth continuing.

"Oh, well, now," said God unexpectedly, appearing from nowhere. "You must remember, after all, Henry, that I can see a little farther through it than you can." He paused as if in thought. "Sometimes, anyhow," He added somewhat ruefully, and vanished.

* 15 *

HIS next—and last—meeting with Miss Iris was entirely unexpected and, on the surface, at least, completely casual. Stopping in at noonday at a downtown department store on some errand of Amelia's, he came upon her with Susy Jennings, who vivaciously explained that they had been buying clothes for the expected baby.

Susy's manner had shed entirely the traces it had once borne of shame for the situation in which she found herself. Indeed, it seemed to Mr. Bremble that she was no longer even embarrassed by it. Several weeks of residence at the old Paterson place, in the unreproachful atmosphere created by the serenity of her hostess and the warm, uncritical friendliness of the maid Clarissa, had apparently relieved Susy once for all of any idea she might formerly have had that she had been delinquent in her responsibilities to herself, to her coming child, or to society.

Mr. Bremble was old-fashioned enough to disapprove of this and fastidious enough to be offended by it. But he told himself, with scrupulous fairness, that Susy's present state of mind was certainly better, both for herself and for the child, than her former state of mind could possibly have been; and

also that it was more than probable that his distasteful reaction to it was due in large measure to his persistent dislike of Susy herself.

If it had been Margery Carruthers, he asked himself, would he have felt the same? He could not answer this question satisfactorily, because he found it impossible really to visualize Margery in this dingy situation. Mr. Bremble knew little about the morals of the younger generation, but he did know something about taste, and he felt that Margery's good taste alone would have saved her from this.

He looked at Susy as she stood chattering to him in the department store, unconsciously contrasting her with Miss Iris. Mrs. Hadley, cool and charming in lilac linen, her thoughtfully smiling face becomingly shadowed by a wide, thin black straw hat, embodied for him, as always, dignity and peace. Susy, her pert, pretty young face made up to a degree of elaboration that was grotesque in combination with the uncouth distortion of her body, was almost enough to make Mr. Bremble understand Amelia's disgust with the facts of life as they existed.

For a moment, half shocked and half thrilled, he imagined Miss Iris herself in Susy's condition, and was overcome by such immediate reverence as would have made him take off his hat, had he not already done so. The picture fled instantly from the department store and established itself against a background of ripening corn. The sky overhead was deep and cloudless blue; birds twittered in the wild rose hedges along the fences; all nature breathed and smiled and visibly grew, and in the midst of it a woman grew rich with life.

"And we found the cutest things you ever saw," Susy rattled on, "didn't we, Mrs. Hadley? We had them sent, or

I declare I'd have to open them right up here in the store and show you, Mr. Bremble. I do hope the baby's a girl. You can dress them so darling."

Recalling the encounter in the light of what happened subsequently, Mr. Bremble remembered with sadness that Iris Hadley, in this the last interview he was to have with her, scarcely uttered a word. She stood restfully beside the counter, smiling, while Susy unburdened herself of her hopes and plans. If he had known, Mr. Bremble thought, that he was not to see Miss Iris again, would he not have seized her forcibly and borne her out of the department store and away, and left Susy gabbling alone to the counters and stools?

For two days later the thunder was loosed again, and this time around Iris Hadley's head.

"Bag and baggage," Amelia Bremble proclaimed triumphantly, as Mr. Bremble came downstairs to dinner after washing up in the bathroom. "Maid and girl and all. So it looks, Mother, as though that's the end of our fine Mrs. Hadley."

"And a fine thing too, if you ask me," nodded Mrs. Corey, eating a chocolate. "'Tis a fine thing, sure enough, ain't it, Queenie?"

Henry Bremble, with an iron band tightening around his heart, stared from one to the other. "What's happened now?" he asked them, almost roughly.

Amelia looked at him in surprise. "Well, don't bite my head off, Henry," she requested. "Nothing's happened that anyone need regret. That Mrs. Hadley has left the neighborhood, that's all—I understand she's left town as well—and taken that disgraceful girl with her. I must say I'm relieved.

What happened early this morning was evidence enough that harm's already been done—”

“What happened early this morning?” demanded Henry Bremble, over the block of sandstone in his throat.

Amelia looked at him sharply. “Henry Bremble, what’s the matter with you? Just alter that tone when you speak to me, if you don’t mind. Why, what happened this morning, since you’re so anxious to know, was that that miserable girl’s carryings-on got out, as such things always do, and got talked about until it got down to the very children of the neighborhood, little Wallie Courtland and half a dozen others; and they hid in the bushes until she came out this morning and chased her back into the house and threw rotten apples at her. That’s all.”

Henry Bremble swallowed. “They—threw—”

“They threw rotten apples at her. One of them must have thrown a rock as well; at least, they had the doctor there a little while later. Of course, I’m not saying it wasn’t naughty of the children, but what can you expect when a girl so outrages all human decency as to—”

“Pretty cute of ‘em, I thought it was,” chortled Mrs. Corey. She nodded several times. “Oh, they’re pretty cute, the young ones—they know what’s what, believe me. Don’t take the little fellers long to see which way the wind blows. No, sir.”

“And, Henry,” added Amelia, suddenly dropping her defensive air and becoming confidential, “there’s more to it than that, it seems. Mrs. Baker tells me there’s been a man hanging around the old Paterson place for some time now, and he wasn’t going to see that girl either; he was going to see Mrs. Hadley herself. And who do you think that man was, Henry? Just guess.”

Mr. Bremble, who had no need to guess, said nothing. But Amelia's question was altogether rhetorical; she had no intention of waiting for his guesses. "Well, I'll tell you, Henry, because I don't suppose you'd guess in a thousand years. It was none other than Mr. Walter Anderson, a pastor, the pastor of our own church, if you please. And—" Amelia's tone rose to the tone of one vindicated in all her previously formed opinions—"not satisfied with visiting a disreputable woman in her disreputable house, with a disreputable girl and a disreputable colored woman—What? Well, they all are, aren't they, or at least so many of them that anybody is justified in drawing her own conclusions? Anyway, they're gone, bag and baggage, lock, stock and barrel, and the house is empty again, just as it was before, and I hope it stays that way if that's the kind of tenants . . . But this is what I was going to tell you, Henry." Amelia's momentary annoyance at her husband's inarticulate gruntings disappeared again in the exciting interest of what she had to disclose. "Not only has Mr. Anderson been hanging around that house at nobody knows what hours and for nobody knows what purposes, but he wasn't satisfied, it seems, even with that. He was down at the station this afternoon to see them off, perfectly shameless. Right out in public, with everybody in town looking on—"

"He'll hear about that, or I'm much mistaken," Mrs. Corey contributed, nodding.

"I should think it would cost him his church," Amelia agreed, "and I must say I think it ought to. We ought never to have called him in the first place. But I must say I'm less concerned with Mr. Anderson than I am with the rest of it. It's such a relief to me to know that Mrs. Hadley is gone—"

Mr. Bremble tried to be silent, but his question was torn

from him. "Isn't she coming back?" he croaked as Amelia paused.

And Amelia, stabbed by the agonized urgency in his eyes, was at last distracted from her satisfaction and triumph. She stared at Mr. Bremble, and one of her hands went out to the arm of her mother's chair. "How should I know whether she's coming back or not? And may I inquire, Henry Bremble, just what it is to you?"

As he did not reply, Amelia's gimlet eyes widened, then narrowed, then flew open again. She clenched the hand that lay on her mother's chair arm and brought it down with a bang. "I knew I'd seen that girl somewhere before!" she cried. "So that's the way it was! Now you look here, Henry Bremble! No, you needn't try to get out of it, either; you look me in the face and tell me—"

Mr. Bremble reached for his hat and left the house.

So passed, between meridian and midnight, the brief and tremulous dream of Henry Bremble: that he would one day open the gate in the picket fence, and go into the quiet of the garden, and sit with Iris Hadley in the summerhouse, and talk of things that concerned themselves alone, and watch her cool hands and her lovely eyes. He had never gone farther than that in all his dreaming.

And now she was gone, and it was he who had caused her going. For the sake of Susy Jennings he had lost her.

He walked, without even knowing he was walking, toward the Paterson house. He reached it in due time, and it was still there. The evening was a lovely one, soft with summer, but it seemed to Henry Bremble that no birds sang. Had she taken the birds too with her, and all light? For, although the sun had not yet quite disappeared under the horizon, and

all the surrounding streets lay wide with gold, there hung about the Paterson garden a shadow. The stillness of the place was the stillness of death.

To Mr. Bremble, it seemed that Mrs. Hadley had not only left town but left the world. Mysteriously, as she had come without telling where she came from, so she had gone without anybody's knowing whither. He would never see her again. The world itself would never see her again. For a moment there was pale comfort in the thought that, leaving him, she had also left the world, returning to the pure and sunny realm that had given her birth. Wherever it was, thought Mr. Bremble, his thin face twitching; wherever it was.

In his pain the long-remembered words of the greatest of his poets came and sang to him. "Farewell; thou art too dear for my possessing, And like enough thou know'st thine estimate—"

But, although the higher reaches of his spirit were soothed by his thankfulness that for a little time he had seen perfection, touched it, cherished it in his mind, there were regions in Henry Bremble that twisted in torment. For what mean price had he thrown this perfection away!

He shuddered inwardly at the thought of the children who had attacked Susy Jennings, and shuddered anew to remember that once, in a blazing moment, he himself had prayed, "Let her be stoned with stones through the streets of the city!" That moment of pitiless anger had been alien to his nature, he knew, and it could not but shame him now as he recalled it.

But the thought of the children, the children! The little children, once so new from God . . . No, Mrs. Corey was right. It didn't take the little fellers long.

The weight of his woe at that moment seemed too great to bear. He could not bear it standing. He opened the gate and went into the garden, making his stumbling way toward the summerhouse.

A book lay open, forgotten, on one of the benches. Its title, in blurred, broken gold, straggled athwart its worn blue binding. "*Through the Looking Glass*," Mr. Bremble read, and sat down. He took the book in his hands, and from his eyes were wrenched some difficult tears.

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AS I understand it, Mr. Bremble," said Dr. Willoughby, cautiously, near the end of their next interview, "you are not a churchgoing man."

"That's right," said Mr. Bremble.

Dr. Willoughby cleared his throat. "Well, now, Mr. Bremble, as you surely know, I don't attach very much significance to that. I'd be the last person to deny that a man may stay away from church and yet be deeply and sincerely religious—"

"Religious?" interrupted Mr. Bremble, puzzled.

"Didn't you tell me you were a religious man, Mr. Bremble?"

Mr. Bremble shook his head. "Not that I know of." And, as Dr. Willoughby did not immediately reply, being presumably employed in entreating the god of psychiatrists to grant him patience, Mr. Bremble accommodatingly filled the gap with further comment. "I've always left religion to my wife. My wife is a religious woman, Dr. Willoughby," Mr. Bremble stated with sudden belligerence, "and neither you nor anybody else is going to suggest in my presence that

she isn't. If you are bringing me here week after week, Dr. Willoughby, merely to criticize my wife and cast reflections—”

“My dear Mr. Bremble!” protested the doctor, startled.
“Surely I—”

“It's all very well,” pursued Mr. Bremble relentlessly, “to say that no slight was intended, and try to make out that I've deliberately twisted your meaning. I haven't twisted your meaning, Dr. Willoughby. You are not going to cast aspersions, in my presence, either upon my wife or upon religion. I respect religion, Dr. Willoughby, and I respect my wife, and I think such remarks would come from your lips a great deal more becomingly if you were a religious man yourself. Just let me ask you a candid question, Dr. Willoughby, and try, if you can, to give me a candid answer: Did you ever in your life raise enough money to carpet a parish hall for any church whatever, of any denomination?”

“Mr. Bremble—”

“My wife did it in less than two weeks,” said Mr. Bremble. “Did you ever organize a rallying drive for a Sunday school, Dr. Willoughby? Did it ever occur to you, in the whole course of your career, to sit down by yourself and work out a design for a medal to be given to the child who brought in the most new members?”

“Mr. Bremble—”

“Well, it did to my wife. And my wife didn't stop with thinking of it, either. She sat down, in the midst of her multitudinous duties, and designed that medal, and had it made, and the membership of that Sunday school was increased in exactly six weeks to double its former size. Have you any achievements of that sort you can point to, Dr. Willoughby, to justify your assurance in criticizing my wife?”

"Mr. Bremble—"

"And if you haven't, and unless you can tell me—and you certainly can't with a straight face—that my wife has ever presumed to come down here and criticize the way you deal with your unfortunate patients, who are, after all, at your mercy—" Mr. Bremble drew in a breath that was almost a sob—"lying here on this couch, absolutely at your mercy, while you sit there and write down insulting things about their wives in that book of yours—"

"Really, Mr. Bremble—"

"And on the subject of couches," Mr. Bremble went on passionately, "as we both seem to be in the mood for frankness, allow me to say that I have never seen one in more wretched taste for the purpose it's supposed to serve. The color of the upholstery alone is enough to madden a man. I speak without prejudice in this matter, for in spite of a lifelong abhorrence of the color green, except as it exists in nature, I would not let my own tastes influence me to the extent of protesting. If you must have a green couch in your office, Dr. Willoughby, could you not at least have chosen a shade that is less reminiscent of moldy spinach?"

Mr. Bremble, pausing for breath, looked interestedly around at Dr. Willoughby. "I never did like spinach myself," he added conversationally. "Do you like spinach, by any chance, Dr. Willoughby?"

Dr. Willoughby did not reply to the question. "I think, Mr. Bremble, we are somewhat confused here today. If you don't mind—"

"The sole virtue of spinach, so far as I can see," continued Mr. Bremble, "is that it serves very well as a background for hard-boiled eggs. Now in the matter of eggs I can speak conclusively, Dr. Willoughby. I see no eggs on this couch—not a single egg—and yet anybody, the merest child indeed,

could see how it cries out for them. I am paying you a handsome fee for this series of treatments, Dr. Willoughby, and the very least you can do is to put eggs on this couch before you ask me to associate myself any further with it. Eggs, do you understand me, Dr. Willoughby? Eggs! Eggs! Eggs!"

Dr. Willoughby made an inarticulate sound.

"You will find them," said Mr. Bremble kindly, "at any grocer's, or, failing that, at any hen's. They are oval in shape—dear me, that's almost a pun, isn't it?" Mr. Bremble chuckled. "Imagine! As you are doubtless aware, Dr. Willoughby, the English word 'oval' is derived from the Latin 'ovum,' signifying egg, and what I have just been telling you—rather foolishly, I must admit—is that eggs are egg-shaped. Ha, ha!— However, to continue: Having obtained your eggs, you put them into water—I will not insist that it be heated beforehand, though if you were one-half as busy, Dr. Willoughby, as a man in your position ought to be, you would undoubtedly find it an advantage—and leave them there, let us say, ten minutes by that abominably ugly clock you have in the corner—"

At this point Dr. Willoughby arose. "Mr. Bremble," he said decisively, "our time, I am afraid, is up. I am sorry that the original issue should have become so confused. Indeed, I may say that I am somewhat alarmed. I had not anticipated so severe a—" He checked himself and made a final note in his black book. "I think we must meet again, sooner than next Tuesday, if possible."

"Any time at all," said Mr. Bremble graciously.

"—And go a little further into the matter we began on, Mr. Bremble. You specifically denied it today, in your perhaps understandable excitement at mistaking my meaning; but if you try hard I think you will remember that you certainly told me you believed in God. Indeed, if I am not mis-

taken, Mr. Bremble, you claimed that God was and always had been your close personal friend."

"God!" said Mr. Bremble, temporarily bewildered, his face slowly clearing. "Oh, is that what you meant! Dear me, Dr. Willoughby, I must apologize. Of course I told you that; I remember it well. But I didn't have the faintest notion you were asking me about God. I thought all along you were talking about religion."

This more than usually ebullient effort had not tired Mr. Bremble. On the contrary, it had stimulated him. It seemed to him, however, that Dr. Willoughby had given him but a limp hand at parting, and he told himself with some concern that he was afraid he had wearied the honest fellow. "Too bad," thought Mr. Bremble as he climbed into the convertible, his heart singing a paean to the skies. "Really too bad of me. I must watch myself."

He felt so extraordinarily light and fleshless as he sat driving that he could hardly realize he was gripping the wheel. The bliss that filled him now was a sudden thing; it had come upon him at the heels of his darkest moment, the moment when he had sat in Iris Hadley's summerhouse, her book in his hands, and wept.

He had carried the book home with him at last, to hold in his hands a little longer before destroying it. He knew that he must destroy it. He had not, of course, been able to escape Amelia's probings on the subject of Susy Jennings, and her compressed lips and smoldering eyes, as he haltingly confessed what he had done for the girl, carried promise of dire reprisal. Amelia—for Amelia—had said very little about it at the time; she seemed enraged beyond the limits of speech. But Mr. Bremble knew that her time would come.

Alone in the house that evening, for Amelia and Mrs.

Corey had gone forth again to a meeting; he took the book from its hiding-place and sat down with it. Its broken binding fell open easily at page after page, but, although Mr. Bremble thought he read, the words meant nothing to him. There was a prefatory poem at the beginning; he did not remember it. The words passed lightly over the surface of his mind, unnoticeable above the dark tides of anguish beneath them.

*Without, the frost, the blinding snow,
The storm-wind's moody madness,
Within, the firelight's ruddy glow
And childhood's nest of gladness.
The magic words shall hold thee fast;
Thou shalt not heed the raving blast.*

*And though the shadow of a sigh
May tremble through the story
For happy summer days gone by
And vanished summer glory,
It shall not touch with breath of bale
The pleasance of our fairy-tale.*

Blindly Mr. Bremble turned the pages backward to see the flyleaf. Perhaps Miss Iris's name, in her own hand, would be written there. His fingers trembled, then halted as though arrested by death. There was writing on the flyleaf indeed, but it began "Dear Mr. Bremble. . . ."

Mr. Bremble shook from head to foot. She had known he would come, as she knew everything.

The clear fine writing blurred before his eyes. "Dear Mr. Bremble—" He could get no further. He read the three words over and over, his eyes stinging. She had remembered him. In her distress and flight she had remembered.

"Oh, my God," thought Mr. Bremble. "Oh, my God." He passed his hand across his eyes and, strengthened, read:

DEAR MR. BREMBLE:

I am leaving this note on the chance that you will find it. It seemed best to take Susy away at once. I am sorry, for I had expected to see you at least once more before leaving. I should have had to go in a little while anyway, for I recently heard that my husband, an officer in the RAF, reported some months ago as killed in action, is alive and recovering from his injuries. He is waiting for me in London now.

Please do not worry at all about Susy; we'll take care of her, and the baby too, until she is on her feet again—longer if necessary. Think of us sometimes, as we shall think of you, and remember me as your sincere and grateful friend,

IRIS HADLEY

There was a postscript. Mr. Bremble, his plunging pulses beating in his ears, bent himself to read it.

If there is ever anything you can do for my young cousin, Walter Anderson, I know you will do it, won't you, Mr. Bremble? I can never forget how much, in my most difficult time, it helped me to know you. Walter is young and impetuous, and he takes his Christianity literally; he may have need of you. I know you'll stand by him.

That was all.

Mr. Bremble felt that he did not quite understand. It was a dream then, nothing but a dream? But of course he had known it was, he told himself dazedly. But of course she had a husband, and a cousin; but of course she lived against the suffering earth, even as he did, and Dr. Wil-

loughby, and Amelia. Nevertheless he could not make it true. She was Miss Iris, dream and wraith and angel, and the book in his hands was hers, not made of paper.

No, the book in his hands was a book; a book, and no more. The note on its flyleaf was merely a note, a woman's note, fragrant with her sweetness, but still no more than gracious words on paper. She had meant to be kind; she had been kind, indeed; her kindness never failed him. But if she had not written it, thought Mr. Bremble piteously—oh, if only she had not written it!

He rose stiffly and carried the book out to the incinerator in the garden. He could burn it now without agony; it was just a book. But he knew that if she had not written the note he could have burned it with joy—a martyr's joy, a sacrificial ecstasy.

He twisted up some newspapers from the box beside the incinerator, struck a match and set them afire, dropping the book upon them. It fell open almost at the end, and the hungry little flames, attacking the worn margin, lit up for a moment the words on the scorching page: *And then . . . all sorts of things happened in a moment. The candles all grew up to the ceiling, looking something like a bed of rushes with fireworks at the top. As to the bottles, they each took a pair of plates, which they hastily fitted on as wings, and so, with forks for legs, went fluttering about in all directions. . . .*

It was then that Mr. Bremble's bliss came on him. There was a moment in which he put out his hand to snatch the blazing book away from the fire, and then there was a moment of blankness, in which he did not know the book was burning, or that he, Henry Bremble, stood watching it burn. The next instant there was a swirling sensation in the top of his head, and a sudden warmth and lightness along

his limbs, and in the next he made his escape into joy.

This joy, coming upon him, had continued with amazing persistence. It filled him like bubbling spirits, yet lay all around him like sunshine. It danced on Amelia's spectacles, causing them to flicker enchantingly; it smote Queenie on one eye and not on the other, so that she gave him a one-eyed leer from the depths of her basket. At the office, it turned Horace Widdinger abruptly into a corkscrew; a merry corkscrew, a noisy corkscrew, but still a corkscrew too enticing in its blithe and spiraling curves to be anything but delightful. It did not make the world beautiful to Mr. Bremble, for the world could never be beautiful again now that beauty had gathered up her shimmering robes and gone; but it did make the world very funny, and Mr. Bremble, looking at it with the eyes of a child who sees for the first time an animated cartoon on the screen, watched it in a series of inward explosions of startled laughter. The cartoons had long since taught him that a solid stone wall can be crumpled by a mouse's paw into a small indefinite wad, only to burst forth an instant later into a charging elephant, but he had never hoped to be admitted into the sphere where such things took place.

And now it was in that sphere that he spent his days. Fire hydrants, hitherto placid, danced before him. Horses, unbending from the reticence of years, had speech with him both antic and profound. Buildings, policemen, telegraph poles, stray cats, and ash heaps, stirred from their ancient lethargy, showed him the tricks—and many and wonderful they were—which they had always before so jealously concealed. "But I knew it. I knew it all the time," thought Mr. Bremble.

Even Mrs. Corey unbent, coming out at last frankly with a fact she had always made a show of concealing, the fact

that she had a beak instead of a nose. He had seen it lifting and falling when she laughed, a veritable beak, smooth, solid and impregnable, for who knew how many years on end? But always, until now, she had put on an air of unawareness about it. To see her sitting there as bland as ever, well and truly beaked, and not caring in the least who knew it, was a stimulating experience to Mr. Bremble. Truth crushed to earth, he felt, would certainly rise again.

There was a change in himself, he knew, to match these other changes. Only a short time ago, for example, it would have perturbed him, on meeting young Mr. Anderson in the street, to note that three flowers grew from the pastor's head. Yet there they were, a rose, an aster, and a daffodil, and remarkably fine specimens too. Not only was Mr. Bremble not perturbed, but he had an almost irresistible desire, which he restrained only by the utmost exercise of his natural diplomacy, to inquire of Mr. Anderson what top-dressing he used.

No thing of all the things he saw, in fact, was the same for Henry Bremble except one, and that was the bed of marigolds in Amelia's garden. Here he had one inexorable enemy still. No marigold of the whole nauseating crowd would change before his eyes to so much as a toadstool; there they stood, unyieldingly malevolent, invincibly yellow, and inescapably marigolds, whatever he did or said. Tying them up periodically, he did his best to throttle them, but they were not so easily throttled as all that. If there was any change at all in their outward aspect, it was the change of growth; they never stopped growing, the devils, never, and not infrequently he thought he could see them doing it. Taller and taller and taller and taller and taller.

One day, to his surprise, he found Miss Nellie Preston living among them. For purposes doubtless connected with

the life of the mind, she had assumed the outward appearance of a toad, but he was not deceived; he would have known those eyeglasses anywhere. He made a tentative feint at her with his trowel, and she leaped erratically backward and sidewise to escape him.

Mr. Bremble nodded, the last of his doubts resolved. "She hops on the curve," he said.

Two days later, after the memorable talk he had had with Dr. Willoughby about religion, he came home from the office, swimming in bliss, to find that Dr. Willoughby had been paying Amelia a call. The specialist greeted him, courteously but with some haste, on the front steps, and at once excused himself and went away.

Mr. Bremble floated happily into the house, to be met with a silence that seemed to him out of tune. Amelia had obviously been crying, and it occurred to him to wonder if she had lost the presidency of the League for Democracy after all. Mrs. Corey bent upon him a gaze of more than usual brightness as he entered and sat down to his dinner, and even Queenie, from her mistress's lap, looked at him with a sort of suspicious awe in her one remaining eye.

However, Mr. Bremble did not mind. He greeted his little family with great heartiness, seeing with some wonder that they were surprised by his tone. He ate his dinner with immense dispatch and relish, easily disregarding the fact that an occasional Brussels sprout, in a jesting mood, changed into soap in his mouth and had to be taken out and laid on the side of his plate.

The women, he thought, seemed but little inclined to conversation. He himself was bursting with it, and yet he did not know exactly what to say while they looked so taken aback and sat so silent. Amelia in particular, as she sat there

now red-eyed and tremulous, would have frightened him in the weeks before the change, for she did not look much like Amelia at all—smaller, somehow, and perhaps less firmly stayed.

She did not frighten him now, but he was curious. "What's the matter, Amelia?" he asked her genially, casually removing another chunk of soap from his mouth and laying it, without complaint, on the plate before him.

Amelia caught her breath. "Henry," she said hesitatingly, in a voice of unaccustomed gentleness, "are you all right? Do you feel quite well?"

"I feel fine," said Mr. Bremble, helping himself to potatoes.

"Henry," Amelia leaned forward a little, her face tense. "Henry, what did you tell Dr. Willoughby last Tuesday? What did you and he talk about that day?"

"We had a fine talk," said Mr. Bremble, nodding. "All about religion, I think it was. He's a sound man, that Willoughby."

Amelia, not relieved, pressed her hands together. "He came to see me this afternoon, Henry—"

Mr. Bremble nodded again. "I know. I met him on the porch."

"He seemed to think," Amelia went on, apparently feeling her way, "that you weren't—that you weren't quite well these days, Henry. He seemed to think you might not be equal to—well, to going to the office every day as you do."

"Nonsense!" replied Mr. Bremble, laughing heartily.

As Amelia and her mother slowly recovered from this—for when in that house had Henry Bremble laughed heartily?—Amelia mustered her resources and tried again. "He seemed to feel, Henry, that you'd been a little confused—"

Mr. Bremble laughed again. "He did, did he? A rather

sensitive man, I'm afraid, Dr. Willoughby. But I'm sorry if I hurt his feelings. It didn't amount to anything, Amelia; it was just a trivial little misunderstanding between us. I took him wrong on something he said to me, or something like that. But I wouldn't dream of holding it against him." Mr. Bremble smiled reminiscently. "After all, he may only have been joking, you know, like these Brussels sprouts."

"Brussels sprouts?" repeated Amelia faintly, casting a startled glance at the vegetable dish. "Brussels sprouts?"

"They turn into soap," Mr. Bremble explained, "after I get them into my mouth. Don't they do it for you? No, I see they don't; you've eaten all yours," he continued chattily. "See?" He picked up a sprout from the side of his plate with a fork. "Soap," he explained, with a sunny and fatherly smile.

Amelia burst into tears. Mrs. Corey, solicitous, dropped Queenie and rushed to her side. Mr. Bremble looked on, mildly amazed. "Why, it's all right, Amelia; they don't mean any harm in the world," he tried to soothe her. "They just want to have a little fun sometimes, like everybody else. Don't you see, Amelia?"

But Amelia, who did not see, only wailed aloud and fled, and her mother went with her, and Queenie followed behind. Mr. Bremble shrugged his shoulders, trying to remember what poet it was who had said that women were unpredictable. He had the impression that more than one, perhaps, had said something of the sort. In any case, he concluded, the poet had been right. And, as the ups and downs of women could not conceivably be any of his concern, he abstractedly picked up one of the lumps of soap, commanded it to turn itself back into a Brussels sprout, and, when it had obligingly done so, ate it.

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NOTHING immediate was done about Mr. Bremble. Dr. Willoughby, a conscientious and a cautious man, counseled patience and deliberation for yet a little while.

"Humor him, Mrs. Bremble, just humor him," he advised, on being visited by Amelia and told about the Brussels sprouts. "I won't attempt to conceal from you that things look a little serious, and that eventually something may have to be done, Mrs. Bremble, but in the meantime—he's entirely amiable, you say?"

Amelia nodded, wringing out her handkerchief. "Yes, doctor."

"Well, just try playing along with him as far as you can. You might even try agreeing with him about these hallucinations he has. He won't expect you to, and the element of surprise—"

Amelia, hysterically agreeing to do anything on earth Dr. Willoughby advised, wrung out her handkerchief and returned to her home; and if Mr. Bremble had not been far too deeply absorbed in his own new and idyllic existence to pay any attention to her, he would have been a good deal surprised at the assiduity with which, during the days that followed, she humored him.

He was, however, far too deeply absorbed to notice Amelia at all, beyond the requirements of ordinary courtesy. His time at home, at the office, and back and forth between them was only too full of incident and surprise. He was always running into the unexpected and the unlikely, and one morning, as he drove the convertible toward the office, he ran into the most unexpected and unlikely sight of all—the sight of Margery Carruthers, at this most improbable hour of the day, afoot and alone.

Mr. Bremble pulled up the car at Margery's side. "Good morning," he greeted her cheerily. "A fine day, Margery. Margery, will you have a ride?"

Margery, quickly responsive as always to his mood, smiled at him. "Why, thank you, kind sir," she said, getting into the car.

Mr. Bremble reached across her and shut the door with a masterful hand. "That being the case," he said as he started the car, "let me ask you a simple question, Margery. Will you marry me?"

Margery, though for a moment startled, looked at her wrist watch. "If you can make it today, I will," she said after consideration. "I married Butch O'Malley yesterday and I'm marrying Spike Wienerwurtzel at three o'clock tomorrow, but I don't think—" she looked at her watch again—"that I have anything particular on for today."

"Good," said Mr. Bremble. "Good. We advance, Margery; we make progress; our progress is excellent. Tell me this one thing, Margery, now that you have made me the happiest of men. Did you ever hear the story about the narcissus?"

"I don't think so," said Margery, knitting her brows.

"Stop me if you've heard it," said Mr. Bremble. "There once was a narcissus that grew in a garden of onions—"

Margery wrinkled her nose. "I don't think I'm going to like this story," she objected.

"Like it or not, you're going to get it," said Mr. Bremble. "Shut up, please, and listen like the happy and fortunate woman I have made you. This narcissus, as I was saying, lived in an onion garden. She got along just fine with the onions until she grew up and bloomed."

"Oh?" said Margery, casting a sidelong glance at Mr. Bremble. "She did?"

"She certainly did," said Mr. Bremble stoutly. "But that may have been because they thought she was one of themselves."

"Well, maybe she thought so too," suggested Margery, though without much conviction.

"Oh, no, she didn't," said Mr. Bremble. "She knew very well that she wasn't in the least like them, and only stayed there because that was where she had been planted. Or perhaps because it was just too much trouble to move."

"She was lazy, this blighted blossom?" Margery inquired.

"Don't call her a blighted blossom," said Mr. Bremble irritably. "At least not yet. At the time of which I speak, she was anything but blighted. She woke up one morning and there was a little puddle in the garden, not far from where she stood, and she saw herself in this puddle, and she was so pretty that it made her laugh. And, at that, some of the onions woke up and saw what had happened, and they began to get excited and work themselves loose at the roots, and a most peculiar smell spread through the garden. I don't know whether the narcissus noticed it or not—"

"She probably noticed it from time to time," said Margery, "but was too polite to say so."

"I beg to differ with you," said Mr. Bremble. "Politeness had nothing to do with it, or very little. You see, this fat-headed young flower—"

"I resent that," said Margery.

"This pretty but immature blossom," Mr. Bremble amended his former severe language, "being very much in love with what she saw in the puddle, was quite unable to understand that the onions, seeing what she saw, would not like it as much as she did. It never occurred to her to imagine that any onion would think, because she nodded and smiled at a tired, fat old gentleman onion in the southwest corner of the garden, that she was in love with him instead of herself, or that the aforementioned gentleman onion might think the same."

"Oh, he didn't!" exclaimed Margery, revolted.

"I am inclined to agree with you," said Mr. Bremble, "that he drew no such conclusion. The opinion was prevalent chiefly among the lady onions and was much discussed at intervals between the graver matters that occupied the members of the League for the Propagation of Bigger and Better Onions. There was even a rumor that an underground movement for the suppression of all narcissi was in hand."

Margery was silent.

"I should like to be able to tell you, at this point," said Mr. Bremble regretfully, "that when the young narcissus heard this rumor she went away quietly in the night from the onion garden, to some place where there were other narcissi growing. But the fact is she lingered and lingered,

chiefly because she was under the impression—call her fatuous if you will—that one of the onions, a swollen, self-important female tuber prominent in the League, was her mother.”

“And wasn’t she?” asked Margery in a somewhat subdued tone.

“I am not a horticulturist,” said Mr. Bremble, “in spite of the fact that there have been efforts to make me one. I can only say that, so far as my experience goes, onions do not as a rule give birth to narcissi, and that if, by some odd chance, an onion should do so, I cannot think that continued close association between them—”

“Be that as it may,” said Margery a little hurriedly, “what did the narcissus do?”

“As I heard the story,” Mr. Bremble replied, shaking his head, “she did nothing. In fact, she never even thought of doing anything until it was too late. You see, the smell in the garden—” Margery winced—“was getting worse and worse all the time, and one morning the narcissus woke up and found herself—”

“No,” said Margery faintly. “No, Mr. Bremble.”

“Found herself,” went on Mr. Bremble inexorably, “smelling of onions. Well, after that there was only one thing to be done. She married, in her terror and uncertainty, the first halfway presentable onion who offered himself, and before long she had a crop of children. And every single one of them,” Mr. Bremble concluded impressively, “was an onion.”

“I didn’t think I was going to like this story,” said Margery, “and I don’t.” She was a little pale, but she smiled. “Will you let me out now, Mr. Bremble? I’ll catch a bus back. And thank you. And good-by, if I don’t see you again.”

Mr. Bremble, driving on, congratulated himself, for it seemed to him that he had done a remarkable thing. See, he thought, how sweet are the uses of adversity after all! He had not wanted to go to Dr. Willoughby, but now, because of his practice in telling stories to Dr. Willoughby, only see what a story he had been able to tell Margery.

"It was a good story, Henry," agreed a familiar Voice at his side, "but don't you think you went a little farther than was strictly necessary?"

Mr. Bremble looked worried. "I didn't mean to."

"It may turn out all right, of course," God conceded. "But still it seems to me you might have had the narcissus look around a little first, Henry, and see if she couldn't find at least one more flower in the garden."

For no reason at all, words flashed to Mr. Bremble: "I said, I will ascend unto the Lord in the early part of the day; with a glad mind will I worship Him while it is yet morning." He was not sure, just then, where he had heard them, or read them, rather; for his mind, prodding in the debris of accumulated memories it held, tried hard to connect them with paper—white paper, typewritten. Suddenly Mr. Bremble slowed down the convertible.

"I never thought of that," he said in wonder.

"Think of it now, Henry," God advised as He left him. "She's a pretty young narcissus to be traveling alone."

Mr. Bremble turned his car about. In the distance, he thankfully saw Margery standing, a bright speck, still awaiting the arrival of the bus. He stepped on the accelerator.

Margery saw him, as he stopped the car, and smiled. "Forget something, Mr. Bremble?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bremble. "Yes, I did, Margery. The fact is, I had a message for Mr. Anderson—you know, young

Walter Anderson, pastor of the Community Church? Do you know him, by any chance?"

Margery shook her head. "I've seen him, of course. But I've never met him."

"You know where he lives, don't you? It's not far from your house."

Margery nodded.

Mr. Bremble hesitated. "Would it be too much trouble for you, Margery, if you just stopped by the parsonage and gave him the message? It's—it's pretty important."

"Why, of course not," Margery agreed cordially. "I'll be glad to, Mr. Bremble. What is the message?"

Mr. Bremble hesitated, for he had neglected to provide himself with a message. He spoke quickly to cover his confusion. "Tell him," he said, "tell him—" his mind strained, grasped, and seized the nebulous tow-rope. "Tell him Harold Perlberg's address is 1656 East Cedar. That's all."

"Harold Perlberg's address is 1656 East Cedar," Margery repeated. "All right, Mr. Bremble; I'll see that he gets it."

Mr. Bremble was a little disturbed. "Don't telephone him, Margery, will you? I can't tell you why, but it's quite important. I want you to see him and tell him yourself, if you will. If it isn't too much to ask."

Margery smiled, amused in spite of her private distress at his embarrassed urgency. "Why, yes, of course, Mr. Bremble," she said reassuringly. "I promise."

Mr. Bremble thoughtfully pursued his way to the plumbing office. Thoughtfully too, as he saw a group of men working in a ditch from which they had discarded a number of stones of assorted sizes, he stopped the car, got out, and filled his pockets with them; and thus equipped went on to his office day.

He worked with tranquil enjoyment through most of the morning, greatly diverted by the playful behavior of his ledgers, which, like everything else nowadays, seemed whole-heartedly bent on giving him pleasure. Page after page, as he turned it, changed before his eyes into splendid parchment, most intricately and brilliantly illuminated in scarlet and purple and gold, like the old monks' manuscripts of which he had seen reproductions at the library. The poetry, however, did not belong to the period of the monks, and it was on a page of that most unmonklike of poets, Algernon Charles Swinburne, that Mr. Bremble lingered most fondly.

*Here life has death for neighbor,
And far from eye or ear
Wan waves and wet winds labor,
Weak ships and spirits steer;
They drive adrift, and whither
They wot not who make thither;
But no such winds blow hither,
And no such things grow here.*

Mr. Bremble read it and closed his eyes. "Pale beyond porch and portal, Crowned with calm leaves she stands," he murmured. But it was Miss Iris he saw, not Proserpine. Crowned with calm leaves, and waiting.

*She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born;
Forgets the earth her mother,
The life of fruits and corn;
And spring and seed and swallow
Take wing for her and follow
Where summer song rings hollow
And flowers are put to scorn.*

Mr. Bremble, rocking back and forth to this music like an empty shell on a pale high wave of silver, was unaware of the passage of time. Behind him the new file clerk pushed drawers in and out, and from time to time Willy Wilson, no longer furious, came into the room and went out again. He knew, vaguely, that they exchanged their customary banter, and he was glad. The file clerk, a pretty little brown-eyed creature with a sweet full-throated laugh, was much to his liking, and it pleased him to hope that she was also much to Willy's. Willy's consuming fury had long since been succeeded by a brooding, not altogether cheerless calm, and his work in the office had greatly improved. But the coming of the new girl into the office, and her open-eyed admiration of Willy and all his works, had done what Mr. Anderson's earnest endeavors had still just fallen short of doing. Willy was himself again, and Mr. Bremble was glad.

But he did not hear what Willy and the file clerk said. His mind, bathed sweetly in Swinburne's limpid song, rose and fell and rose again, unheeding.

*Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light,
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight;
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.*

The "things diurnal" roused him. He looked at the clock and then, startled, at the open door of Mr. Widdinger's office. It was nearly time to go out of the office for lunch, and Mr. Widdinger had not come in. Mr. Bremble, perturbed,

put his hand into his pocket and fingered his stones anxiously. It would be too bad if Mr. Widdinger did not come in at all. But perhaps he would come after lunch, as he sometimes did.

Mr. Bremble, brightening, feigned great industry, settling himself to wait the few remaining minutes until Willy and the file clerk should go off together to lunch.

They were long, long minutes to Mr. Bremble. When at last they were over and the two young workers had gone, he rose from his chair in relief and went into Horace Widdinger's office. Mr. Widdinger's comfortable oak swivel chair stood, as usual, turned a little aside from the desk, and Mr. Bremble did not move it. In the dreamy and leisurely manner of a man who takes an almost sensual pleasure in his work, he began paving the seat of Mr. Widdinger's chair with the stones from his pockets, carefully turning the sharper edges uppermost.

For Mr. Widdinger, no matter how much he had been behaving of late like a corkscrew, was yet a juicy and a well-fleshed man, and, like a great many other gentlemen of full habit, had a custom of flinging himself into his chair jocosely or pettishly, as the case might be, without looking at it beforehand. Mr. Bremble saw no reason to suppose that he would behave otherwise today.

Finishing his task, he started to go downstairs; but at the door he paused, looking back at the chair. The stones were undoubtedly good ones, with many sharp edges, stones as good as though provided by the gods to serve his purpose. Mr. Bremble surveyed them with wistful pride for a long, long moment. How carefully he had selected them. How patiently he had laid them in position. How gloatingly he had dreamed of the moment of impact. Ah, well . . . With

only one sigh, sharp indeed, of resignation, Mr. Bremble went back into the office, stopped briefly at his own desk, and covered the stones on Mr. Widdinger's chair with the thin and well-worn cushion from his own.

This time he escaped the threshold and went downstairs. The unpaved parking lot, wet from a recent shower, was empty of human life. A few cars belonging to employees on the other floors of the plumbers' building stood about, but all were unoccupied. Mr. Bremble, turning the corner of the building to go to his own car, caught sight of a figure approaching the building from the opposite side, walking. By the bulk of the figure and the jaunty angle of the Panama hat it wore, he recognized it at once as Horace Widdinger.

Mr. Bremble's spirits rose. This, he felt, was almost too much good fortune. He drew back behind the corner of the building, hastily scooped up a handful of mud from the ground, compressed it into a sticky mass, and waited. He must needs wait, for he did not trust his aim from too great a distance. He would wait, if he could, until the moment Mr. Widdinger reached the revolving door at the front of the building, and then—

Mr. Widdinger, a brisk pedestrian, was almost there. Mr. Bremble, peering around the corner of the wall, took careful aim. There was time for only one cast; it must fly true. He drew back his arm, most slowly, and let fling. A sharp yelp of surprise and outrage instantly blessed him.

Mr. Bremble, beaming, dusted his hands together and got into the car. A moment later, Mr. Widdinger, holding a bedaubed handkerchief against his right temple, charged around the corner into the parking lot with murder in his eye.

"Who threw that mud at me?" he bellowed, seeing Mr. Bremble.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Bremble distantly.

"Somebody in this damn lot threw some mud at me!" Mr. Widdinger shouted. He took the handkerchief away from his temple and showed it to Mr. Bremble.

Mr. Bremble looked at the handkerchief and then about the lot, his gaze slowly returning to Mr. Widdinger's apoplectic countenance. "There's nobody here," he said quietly, "except us chickens."

"Well, hell, *you* didn't throw it," snapped Mr. Widdinger contemptuously. His prawnlike eyes narrowed with sudden suspicion. "Or did you? By God, if you did, I'll—"

"I can tell you what I think, of course," Mr. Bremble interposed smoothly. "If you want my opinion for what it's worth, I should say it was probably Susy Jennings who threw it."

"Susy Jen—" Mr. Widdinger's mouth, comically arrested in mid-word, hung ajar, and his large ears reddened to the color of newly peeled beets.

Mr. Bremble nodded. "And if you were thinking of reporting the incident to Mr. Prentiss, Mr. Widdinger, let me advise you to do nothing of the kind. There would almost certainly be a searching inquiry. An excellent man, our good employer, but a bit strait-laced in moral matters. Almost old-fashioned, wouldn't you say? Or don't you think so, Mr. Widdinger?"

Mr. Widdinger, for the moment confounded, said nothing.

"Well, good-by, Mr. Widdinger, for the present," said Mr. Bremble cordially. "Just go up to your office and sit down and think it over. I must really go now. I have an important engagement right after lunch."

* 18 *

THE intoxication of Mr. Bremble's morning, with its poetry and its promise and its almost perfect achievement, remained with him throughout his modest luncheon—which, by the way, he hardly touched, so elated was he—but it suffered a sudden eclipse a short time later. On his way from the coffee shop where he had lunched to the office of Dr. Willoughby, that happened to him which detached him from his new-found joy and plunged him, for a little time, back into his former state: the thin and wretched existence of Henry Bremble as his womenfolk and his world had known him. Driving the convertible past the County Building, he saw and recognized a man with whom he had gone to school as a child.

On the instant, his ecstasy departed, fled out of him utterly, leaving no trace. On the instant, that bitter refrain, "You got to walk down a loathsome valley," wailed up in his ears again. For that which stood and swayed upon the sidewalk, and had dried streaks of soup down its nauseating shirt-front, and scratched behind its grimy ear like a sick dog looking for fleas, and searched the eyes of passers-by with a tawdry hope of notice and largess, was yet undeniably, and

after these years, Frank Allen. Frank Allen the magnificent, the admired, the beloved, the daring.

He was a little older than Henry Bremble and had been Henry's idol. The painfully restored Mr. Bremble saw him now, as he had seen him in loving memory many times, with his splendid young body stripped for a dive in the river. He saw the downward cleave through sparkling air; he saw Frank come up suddenly, dripping and grinning, flinging back his hair from his eyes; and heard the echo of Frank's exuberant yell: "Hey, come on, Henry—what're you waiting for?"

The heart of Mr. Bremble twisted within him. "Frank, Frank, Frank," it cried out harshly and dreadfully, "what were you waiting for? Not this! Not this!"

But he stifled its voice as best he could and pulled the car to a halt against the curb. "Frank," he said indistinctly, leaning out of the window. "Frank?"

The derelict turned and looked at him and nodded. "That's my name," he said, taking a step toward the car. "What's it to you, Mister?"

"Don't you know me, Frank?" said Henry Bremble.

The other came nearer, slowly shaking his head. "Can't say's I do. Why, say!" he suddenly exclaimed, his bleared eyes widening, "Looky here! You ain't little Henry Bremble, are you?—Well, dog my cats if it ain't! How are you, Henry?"

The two shook hands, and there was an awkward silence. It was Frank who broke it at last. "Long time no see," he remarked.

"Yes . . . I mean no," said Mr. Bremble.

Frank made another effort. "Well, how you doin', Henry? Look pretty prosperous to me. Got your own buggy and everything."

"Yes," said Mr. Bremble. He felt that courtesy demanded his asking Frank in return how he was doing, but the answer was too piteously apparent, and he could not.

"Well, well, well!" said Frank after a moment. "Little Henry Bremble, after all these years! . . . You a married man, I reckon, Henry?"

Mr. Bremble nodded.

"That's one thing I never let myself in for, anyhow," said Frank philosophically, and continued in a slightly changed tone, "I reckon you can see things ain't none too good with me, Henry."

Mr. Bremble cleared his throat.

"Been a coon's age now," went on Frank, "sence I had me any luck at all, Henry. Ain't had a job now for God only knows how long. Ain't even had anything to eat sence yesterday mornin'."

With the last words a certain whine, easily recognizable as habitual, crept into Frank's tone, and the dirty hand he had laid on Mr. Bremble's car twitched anticipatorily. "Wouldn't like to help an old pal out a little, would you, Henry ol' boy ol' boy?"

To Mr. Bremble, agitatedly searching his pocket for his wallet, the embarrassment of the moment, already almost intolerable, was intolerably increased by Frank's painstaking attempt at lightness of tone. Mr. Bremble was afraid he was actually going to cry. The encounter, lasting less than five minutes, had stripped him of all his experience, all his manhood, and all his years but nine. He felt as he would have felt at the age of nine if he had suddenly seen Frank Allen stripped and befouled with slime.

One horrified look then, and he would have fled; yes, certainly fled, and wept. . . . And to turn and flee was exactly

what he wanted to do now. Nothing on earth could help him but instant flight, nor did Henry Bremble care where that flight might lead him.

Frank took the money, when Mr. Bremble finally got it out, with an eagerness he did not trouble to conceal. "Certainly much obliged, Henry," he said. "Don't let me keep you if you got to go on somewhere. I know how it is with these here model citizens. They got their work to do, and it's important as all hell. Ain't that right, Henry?"

He stuffed the money into the pocket of his noisome trousers. "No, don't let me keep you, Henry, if you got to go." His own eagerness to be gone was blatantly unconcealed; his unsteady eyes even now wavered toward a tavern sign in the near distance.

Mr. Bremble swallowed. "Well, maybe I better," he said uncertainly, over an urgent feeling that there was something he must do before he went. "Well, good-by, Frank, and better luck by the time we—" He could not go on.

"Sure, sure," said Frank encouragingly. "Swell seein' you, Henry. Never once thought, by golly, I'd ever set eyes on Henry Bremble again. Damn funny world, ain't it? Maybe I'll be a millionaire when next we meet. Who knows?"

Mr. Bremble, wincing at the words "when next we meet," for they were the ones he had not been able to say, attempted to smile in assent. He cleared his throat apologetically. "I would ask you to come home and have dinner with me, Frank," he mumbled, scarlet to the ears, "but my wife—Amelia hasn't been any too well just lately—"

He faltered over the lie, and he knew Frank knew it. But there was no resentment in Frank's returning gaze. "Why, sure, Henry, sure—I know how it is with the ladies. This ain't a very good time to ask me to dinner anyhow—as you

see, I ain't got on my banquetin' suit today." Frank winked largely and stepped back, swaying, from the car. "Well, so long, Henry ol' boy ol' boy, and give my best to the missus and the kids—"

Mr. Bremble shook his head.

"What—no kids?" Frank looked at him somewhat quizzically, and Mr. Bremble, immediately sure that Frank's next comment would be on the ribald side, completing his agony, did not wait to hear it. He shook his head abruptly, leaned forward, and started the car as noisily as possible.

The car, always alarmingly responsive to its driver's moods, lurched eccentrically. It was several minutes before he had it on a steady course and traversing its proper lane along the street. During these minutes his attention was necessarily given to the mechanism, but as soon as they were over, reaction set in, and shame. He had thought himself done with shame, and now look at him.

In vain he told himself that Frank had wanted no more of him than the money he begged for. In vain he told himself that the man he had left was no longer Frank Allen at all. In vain he asked himself if he had not had enough of meddling. In vain he reminded himself of Frank's eagerness to leave him. In vain he recalled to memory, in frantic succession, the leer on Frank's face when he learned that his friend was childless, the way Frank's bloodshot eyes had yearned at the tavern, and the inexcusable soup stains on Frank's shirt. The inescapable fact remained that Frank had asked him, Henry Bremble, for bread, and had got for all response a very stone.

Mr. Bremble pulled his mind away and tried to concentrate on his driving. But never driver, surely, had so much to contend with, for he found the convertible suddenly

crowded with unbidden passengers. It seemed to him that everyone he knew was there except Miss Iris and the maid Clarissa. Amelia was there, and her mother, and Susy Jennings. Walter Anderson was there, holding Queenie austerely on his knees. Margery Carruthers was there. All these were crowded into the front seat with him; and in the back seat sat a chorus of lady leaguers, their heads shaking in unison, their mouths already open to cry "Shame!": Mrs. Courtland, Mrs. Carruthers, Mrs. Baker, Mrs. Hyslop, Mrs. Prince.

"I couldn't help it," Mr. Bremble thought he shouted. "I tell you I couldn't help it!"

Dr. Willoughby appeared from nowhere and inserted himself between Amelia and Mrs. Corey. "Really, Mr. Bremble—" he began.

"Is that the way you treat your childhood friends, Henry?" asked Amelia sadly. "Why didn't you bring poor Mr. Allen home to dinner? I've always tried to be a good wife to you, Henry—"

"You been a good enough wife for anybody, Amelia," Mrs. Corey put in, nodding. "It's just men's tricks, that's all. We know all about men's tricks, though, don't we, Queenie?"

"Oh, shame. Oh, shame. Oh, shame," chanted the lady leaguers in the back seat, shaking their heads.

"Well, my goodness, Mr. Bremble," piped Susy Jennings, "what got into you? You always seemed so kind—"

Mr. Bremble's hunted eyes sought Walter Anderson's, but the thin, ascetic features were suddenly stern. "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity," the minister intoned as from a distance, not looking at Mr. Bremble. And at these words Margery Carruthers' tender

lower lip quivered, and she drew in a hurt, small breath. "No, Mr. Bremble. No," she whispered, and looked away.

"But I tell you I couldn't help it!" shouted the beleaguered Mr. Bremble, even louder than before, so it seemed to him. "I tell you—"

A solid additional figure wedged itself in, and bent upon him the righteous and eyeglassed gaze of Miss Nellie Preston. "You can't pick and choose that way, Mr. Bremble," she told him decisively. "You have to take them as they come—"

A chaos of sounds, variegated but harsh, assailed Mr. Bremble's ears. All of them, it seemed to him, were shouting at once: "Men's tricks. . . . A brother is born for adversity, isn't he, Queenie? . . . Is that the way you treat your childhood friends? . . . Is that the way, is that the way, is that the way you treat them? . . . Oh, no, Mr. Bremble, oh, no! . . . You always seemed so kind, Mr. Bremble. . . ."

"Shame! Shame! Shame!" chanted the chorus steadily through it all.

Mr. Bremble, in this extremity, cast his eyes upward and called upon God. And God appeared, and the tumult was suddenly still. The passengers in Mr. Bremble's car disappeared as if blown away by a sudden wind, and Mr. Bremble was alone with God.

God looked at him for a long, long time, it seemed, as though meditating some problem that required decision. Henry Bremble sat through what seemed to him a small eternity, waiting and waiting as the car rolled on. At last, between hope and fear, he saw God shake His head.

"Well now, Henry," said God gently, looking disappointed, "I never thought you'd treat a man that way."

And at that, the last straw, certainly the last straw, cer-

tainly the last conceivable wisp of any possible straw, Henry Bremble succumbed. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" his soul cried out in torment as he pulled his car to a stop.

But God was gone, and the empty street told him nothing. He peered through the windshield at it, but he could not see. The glass seemed suddenly and brutally opaque, as if of deliberate intention it joined with the rest of the world in shutting him out. He got out of the car and walked a few paces down the sidewalk. A gaunt, skulking dog, hungry and wary, darted out of an alley. Seeing Mr. Bremble, he stopped and stiffened.

Mr. Bremble also stiffened. For a moment he wanted the dog's favor as he had never wanted anything in his life. He put out a shaking hand and made shift to whistle. And the dog, horrified at a condescension that in his unhappy experience led to nothing more than the humiliation and torment of a tin can attached to his tail and left there until in desperation he gnawed it off, uttered an agonized yelp of dread and aversion, thrust his threatened tail between his legs, and made off back down the alley as though the devil were after him.

A cosmic anger rose in Mr. Bremble. He felt that he himself rose with it, swelling. The very street shrank from him and beneath him. He towered above it. What had he been about, these months, these years, to suffer insult after insult unavenged? What had it brought him to, his cowardly shrinking? Why, to this: that he himself had turned from an old friend with loathing, and that the very dogs of the streets now justly spurned him.

But no longer, thought Mr. Bremble, no longer. He grew and he grew; the street in which he stood was Lilliputian.

He could have picked it up like a paper napkin and crumpled it in his hand. As for the little human creatures that crawled along it, he could have crunched them, like so many shrimp, between his mighty jaws, and it was only because he had other things to do that they escaped. It was only because he had first to clear his name—

Mr. Bremble paused on the sidewalk, flexing his Gargantuan muscles and considering his table of agenda. It was an impressive table. It included forcing Dr. Willoughby down upon his green couch, and smothering him with sliced and hard-boiled eggs; sending Mrs. Corey summarily away to the aviary of her proper residence; blowing Queenie out of existence with one scornful puff; and picking apart the members of the League for Democracy and the Modern Parents Organization with a pair of small and time-consuming tweezers. It included dealing with Miss Nellie Preston through a complicated series of tortures, during each of which he would remind her that you have to take them as they come. If he had time he would send a large consignment of lipsticks to the Helping Hand, and if it forbade their use then let it beware.

But first and foremost—for in his new role he remained a man of integrity, and his prime concern must be to rid his own character of stain—he knew that he must find Frank Allen, good old Frank Allen, good old good old good old Frank Allen ol' boy ol' boy ol' boy, and take him home to dinner, soup stains and all. Could he not hear Frank now, as he turned himself about and strode toward the convertible, shouting as he had shouted in times gone by, “Hey—come on, Henry! What’re you waiting for?”

“I’m coming!” Mr. Bremble shouted in return. “I’m com-

ing, Frank. Ol' boy ol' boy ol' boy. Just wait a minute, Frank ol' boy; I'm coming."

And with a wave of reassurance to the waiting Frank, who stood, dripping, up to his chin in bright water, Mr. Bremble got into the convertible, slammed the door, turned on the ignition, stepped on the starter, released the clutch, and, merrily making a superb U-turn where no U-turn was permitted, ran head-on into a heavy and advancing truck.

There was a crash, a blinding light, a stopping. Mr. Bremble felt himself shot several miles upward, descending again to bound and rebound between earth and heaven. Eggs, buttons, and marigolds showered about him.

He had just time to seize an egg in each hand and hurl them, one after the other, at the fugitive coattails of Dr. Willoughby, and to note with regret, as they found their mark, that he had forgotten to make sure they were boiled before he threw them. Too bad, he felt; a mean advantage to take. Too bad, too bad.

The rest was silence. Silence, and all darkness.

* 19 *

HIS return to consciousness found him in what he dimly knew, in spite of the ringing of faraway bells in his ears, to be a hospital. Amelia and her mother were there, a nurse, and a doctor. From time to time Amelia sobbed aloud, and from time to time the doctor or the nurse laid a quiet hand upon his wrist.

The hospital room seemed to Mr. Bremble a very small one. It had white walls, not of wood but of canvas. He thought curiously how odd it was that the room should be so small.

It was not a straight room, either. It could not, thought Mr. Bremble, have been well built in the first place, or it would not now show this distressing tendency to go off at irrelevant angles. And surely no sensible contractor would consider a couple of laths and a few strips of canvas adequate materials for a shelter for any man, particularly a man as sick as Mr. Bremble. For he was sick, Henry Bremble; oh, yes, so sick. So sick.

And so unutterably tired. Yes, that was the worst. Mr. Bremble thought he had never been so tired in his life. He knew he ought in decency to call attention to the miser-

able job they had done of building the hospital, in order that it might be corrected for his successors, but he had not even the energy to speak, and, as for himself, the walls might be of canvas or of nothing. Mr. Bremble did not care.

How still they were keeping everything. Except for Amelia's intermittent sobs and the tiny, tiny ticking of the watch on the nurse's wrist, there was absolutely no sound within the room. Not even—why, yes, that was what he missed—not even Queenie's asthmatic sniffing and snoring.

Over his head a round white bowl containing a light bulb looked down at him with a cool and tolerant eye. The light in the bowl was not turned on at all. More negligence, Mr. Bremble told himself fretfully under his bandages, and noticed the bandages now for the first time since waking. They were all over him, the bandages, or so it seemed. He was literally swathed in gauze from head to foot, and there was something much heavier than gauze—was it plaster, perhaps?—hardening, slowly but relentlessly, around his ribs.

They were trying to choke him, were they? They were going to sit there and wait while the plaster hardened, pressed in around him, squeezed the lifeblood whistling from his vitals? He might have known it, thought Mr. Bremble wearily, he might have known that they were all in the pay of Widdinger.

Oysters, thought Mr. Bremble indifferently from the depths of his fatigue; oysters, all of them, the doctor, the nurse, Mrs. Corey, and Amelia. Oysters. Their smooth and shining shells protected them as nothing in all his life had protected Henry Bremble. No, he had not been protected; he had never had a sign of a shell to cover his nakedness; he had shivered naked and bare to every nail-shod foot that

chose to tread him down, to every vindictive hand that carried a stick to poke with. Why had he not, at least, been given a shell? Why had Amelia caused him to buy, not a car with a shell, but a flimsy convertible thing through whose frail fabric top, through whose fallible glass windshield, a man could be catapulted into flame by the merest touch of a grazing truck?

Amelia sobbed convulsively again. The nurse went over and patted Amelia's hand. "There, there, my dear," she said. "There, there, there, there."

Mr. Bremble paid them but little attention, beyond noticing that Amelia somehow seemed to have cracked her shell a little. No doubt that was why the nurse was comforting her. One oyster, thought Mr. Bremble, comforting another; it was an odd sight to see, and an odd conceit altogether. He thought that God, in the cheerful and comradely days they had known together, would have smiled to see it.

Those had been the days, thought Mr. Bremble with a stab of pain; good days, good nights, when God had come and sat on the edge of his bed and listened to him, patiently, while he thought his thoughts.

Suddenly all that remained of Henry Bremble strained against the plaster. "Come back," he cried, and by the instant bending of the four figures toward him he knew that he had made himself heard. He tried to gesture them away, for he knew that what little strength he had was needed now for his effort to reach his God. "Come back—oh, please come back," moaned Henry Bremble.

Amelia flung herself at the bed, but was restrained by the nurse. "Oh, let me go to him, Miss Parsons, he's calling me," she begged, but the nurse shook her head. Amelia sank back with a gasp and a sob, covering her face with her hands.

Mr. Bremble writhed within his plaster. Be still, he wanted to command them, be still, but he could not spare the time; there was so little. "Come back—oh, please come back," he moaned in agony.

There was no answer but multiple cackling laughter. He thought he recognized Mr. Widdinger's voice, and Susy Jennings' and Willy Wilson's. Yes, no doubt it would amuse them to see him now. It never failed to amuse them to see him helpless, like a turtle turned on its back and unable to right itself.

But their laughter did not hurt him as before. He took note of it only in passing, as it were, with a moment of slight shock at the crassness of the official who had let them into the hospital, and a still more fleeting astonishment that he was not yet past being shocked by what Amelia called humanity. "You got to walk through a loathsome valley—"

But if at the end no God awaited him?

He labored against the plaster. "Oh God, please come—" But he knew that he made no sound. The words, thrust from him with such effort, died in his rattling throat. The sound of bells—

He had heard the bells before, he now remembered, very faint, very thin, very far. Their chime seemed nearer now, and much more urgent. They were mocking him, perhaps, as everyone had mocked him. Or was it possible they were praying for him? For it seemed to Henry Bremble, as he lay there racked with yearning, that he heard in their rise and fall the words of his plea: "Please come . . . please come . . ."

Too late, thought Mr. Bremble, oh, too late. No man could wait longer. No man could wait through another such

eon of anguish. Bitterness came upon him in his dying, and he flung God's own words back into His face. "I never thought You'd treat a man that way," he said.

Then suddenly he knew that God was in the room. God pushed aside the canvas walls and Amelia and her mother and the doctor and the nurse. He stood looking down at Mr. Bremble for a long moment.

"You tired, Henry?" He said at last.

Mr. Bremble nodded weakly. "Pretty tired."

"Thought so. I reckon you're about due for a good long rest. Well, I've got a nice place in the country where you can get it. Got anybody—any friends—you want to say good-by to before we go?"

Henry Bremble shook his head. "I never really had any friends but You," he murmured weakly.

God smiled. "Neither has anybody else, Henry. Ready?"

He leaned over and touched Mr. Bremble lightly on the arm, and Mr. Bremble got up, feeling strong and swift, as though wine instead of blood ran in his veins. There was music somewhere, faint and far away.

They walked to the door together, and Mr. Bremble glanced back. Mrs. Corey was supporting Amelia, who had tried to cast herself across Mr. Bremble's bed, weeping. "Oh, Mother," Amelia sobbed against Mrs. Corey's shoulder, "did you hear what he said to me, just before—just before he went? He said 'I never really had any friends but you.' Oh, Mother. . . ."

Mr. Bremble looked at God. God winked. They went out together, laughing, into blue air and the wild sweet caroling of bells.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Langley narrowly missed being a native of the Philippine Islands and was born instead at Fort Brown, Texas, shortly after the return of her Army parents. Orphaned in infancy, she grew up in Southeast Missouri under the tutelage of her two grandmothers. The major part of her adult life has been spent in Chicago, but for the past year and a half she has lived in California. She is married and has a son and a daughter in college.

Dorothy Langley's previous novel, *Dark Medallion*, won the Friends of American Writers annual award for the best novel by a Midwestern writer in 1945.

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